

POETICS OF DIFFICULTY IN POSTMODERN POETRY

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores aspects of difficulty in the work of post-1945 British and American poets. While no unified theory of difficulty is attempted, difficulty is interpreted as part of the poem's ethical and intellectual commitment towards the socio-historical matrix that harbors it. Chapter 1 undertakes a general overview of the aesthetic and social issues involved in the practice of poetic difficulty. In chapter 2, I examine the work of the American poet John Ashbery. Through readings of *The Tennis Court Oath*, "The Skaters," and "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," I argue that Ashbery's poetry is uncertain about the ethicality of difficulty, and as a result the difficulty of his poetry performs complex involutions and self-defeating maneuvers in which irony becomes both indispensable and insufficient. In chapter 3, I discuss both the early and late poetry of J.H. Prynne with a special emphasis on the reader's complex relationship with a late-Modernist text that demands tremendous amounts of labor. I argue that this relationship can be understood in terms of a version of love that is shaped both by Prynne's explicit theoretical positions and by the reader's own perceptions of loyalty and reward. Chapter 4 takes up the possibility that difficulty in poetry is an outcome of the poet's sense that language is complicit in, and is the prime instrument of, collective acts of violence. I look at J.H. Prynne's "Refuse Collection," which was written in response to the torture in Abu Ghraib prison. I complement this stance towards complicity with a reading of Peter Riley's poetry, which questions the inevitability of complicity and difficulty. In the fifth and final chapter, I take up the possibility advanced by both British and American poets as well as twentieth-century philosophers that poetry is a privileged site of thinking, and that difficulty is an effect and instrument of such thought. I conclude that poetic difficulty might indeed point to a radically different mode of employing and responding to human creativity.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Nandini Ramesh Sankar was born in the Indian state of Kerala, and completed her BA in English from Vimala College, Calicut University. She received MA and MPhil degrees in English from The Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages (now The English and Foreign Languages University), Hyderabad, India.

This dissertation is dedicated with love to my parents
S.P. Ramesh and K. Hemalatha

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PREFACE

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results.

—T.S. Eliot¹

It must be abstract.

—Wallace Stevens²

These famous Modernist pronouncements have in common an air of inevitability: the auxiliary “must” features prominently in both. If Eliot points to a set of socio-cultural conditions as the source of this compulsion, for Stevens the compulsion arises from the internal logic of art as “supreme fiction.” Difficulty might be effectively located in the highly charged and conflicted zone described by these remarks: the complex interplay between the creative imagination and the material conditions within which it operates is the source of most forms of difficulty. This is the fundamental assumption of this dissertation.

The necessity of difficulty has survived the transition from Modernism to Postmodernism. Any engagement with the more ‘experimental’ poetry since the Second World War cannot therefore evade the question of difficulty. But the extreme ordinariness and vagueness of the term makes it resistant to extended critical exposition or theoretical reflection. This is perhaps why, thirty-two years after George Steiner declared a ‘theory of difficulty’ to be a desideratum for understanding twentieth-century poetry, poetic difficulty still remains under-theorized. My work seeks to make explicit some of the theoretical, aesthetic, historical, and ethical factors that have allowed poetic

¹ *Selected Essays* 289.

difficulty to index the despairs as well as the hopes of the long and continuing twentieth century. I do this through a critical engagement with the work of Postmodern British and American poets in which difficulty appears as a conscious and often explicitly theorized strategy of poetic expressivity. I address the work of John Ashbery, J.H. Prynne, Peter Riley, Veronica-Forrest-Thomson, Charles Bernstein, and Steve McCaffery, though it is Prynne's work that receives the greatest amount of attention.

Chapter 1 aims to locate the social co-ordinates of poetic difficulty, and to orient aesthetic considerations ultimately within the force-field of socio-historical tendencies. It is a survey of sorts, but arranged thematically rather than chronologically. Problems of nomenclature, typologies of difficulty, riddles and cryptograms are some of the subtopics that are discussed. I conclude by pointing out that even in its most autonomous modes, poetic difficulty has to operate with a full knowledge of its public presence. The decision to withhold reference—even if only temporarily—foregrounds the fragmentation of the hypothetical public space to which all acts of communication implicitly or explicitly address themselves. The chapters that follow explore various aspects of this fundamental estrangement and its relationship to the poetic act.

In chapter two, I explore the source of the curious doubleness of John Ashbery's difficulty: the fact that it can remain difficult and at the same time appeal to an extremely diverse audience is of particular interest to me. The difficulty of Ashbery's poetry usually derives from the absence of a coherent and consistent speaking voice. The curious paradox of his work, however, is that while it continuously destabilizes the lyric subject, it also persistently adverts to familiar conceptualizations of the category of the human. The work never pushes itself to the limits of the anti-humanist trajectory that it creates for

² *Collected Poems* 380.

itself, and Ashbery's irony always stops short of its own anarchic and nihilistic extremes. This moderation, I argue, is due to an ethics that remains dubious about the merits of the nexus between difficulty and the rejection of humanism. This ambivalence is clear in both his most experimental volume—*The Tennis Court Oath* (1962)—and his later work that alternates between comic, procedural, surreal, and Romantic modes. I analyse several poems from *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), “The Skaters” from *Rivers and Mountains* (1966), and “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” (1975) in order to prove that there is a concrete form of humanism that emerges with relative consistency throughout his prolific and varied writing, and that his poetry remains accessible—and to that extent corrects its difficulty—by recognizing the category of the human as ultimately given and closed rather than as pure possibility. The constructivism of this poetry, I conclude, is complicated by an occasional but powerful realism through which it articulates its ethical uncertainties.

In chapter 3, I examine the work of the British poet J.H. Prynne in order to think about one possible way of imagining the relationship between the difficult poem and the reader. Prynne's difficulty emerges—as is evident from his early essay “Resistance and Difficulty”—in part from his fidelity to the ineluctable presentness of matter. His work therefore offers the possibility of a realism that need not be complicit with the positivist discourses of science or with the totalizing tendencies of traditional metaphysics and, needless to say, humanism. Yet a concern with humanist themes such as love persist in his work, and when they become thematically underrepresented in the later work, their presence is nevertheless palpable to the reader, who is locked into a verbal labyrinth within which the meaning of desire, possession, suffering, and effort have to be

reconfigured. I focus on an untitled poem from the 1974 *Wound Response*, and two recent sequences *Unanswering Rational Shore* (2001) and *Streak~~~Willing~~~Entourage Artesian* (2009), with a special emphasis on Prynne's use of data from the physical sciences.

"Difficulty and Complicity," the fourth chapter, examines how poetic difficulty is generated by lyric poetry's attempt to accept the demands of society while striving to retain the singularity of its utterance. Complicity is the ethical effect of our social condition, and post-Holocaust thought finds it essential to acknowledge this fact while at the same time transcending it. I consider how the idea of poetic difficulty refracts through the notion of complicity, which is understood by several poets as an inevitability arising from the shared nature of language. J. H. Prynne has been heavily influenced by the work Paul Celan, the Jewish poet and Holocaust-survivor, who had a fraught relationship with the German language. After a brief overview of Celan's views on the relationship between obscurity and poetic language—with a special emphasis on some of his remarks in the "Meridian" speech—I go on to compare the work of J.H. Prynne and fellow Cambridge poet Peter Riley. I examine the ways in which Prynne's poetic practice reflects his increasing sense that the medium itself is essentially implicated in the public acts performed through it. Prynne is insistent about language's role in engendering state-sponsored violence: so the creative use of language always takes place under the cloud of its complicity and culpability. Difficulty points, then, to the difficulty of resisting through language that to which language has already acquiesced. I examine how this aspect of Prynne's work, which is incipient in the early work, intensifies in the poem "Refuse Collection" (2004) written in response to the Abu Ghraib torture photographs. In the concluding sections of the chapter, I examine the alternative to Prynne's theory and

practice offered by fellow Cambridge poet Peter Riley. While Riley is aware of the problem of complicity, he refrains from making it an occasion for despair or a withdrawal into poetic obscurity. I conclude by arguing that the insistence on a universal complicity in fact creates the conditions for the retrieval of human agency, and that Riley's optimism and Prynne's apparent pessimism might not therefore be irreconcilable.

My final chapter—"Thinking through Difficulty"—explores the possibility that difficulty might facilitate a mode of thinking unique to poetry. This possibility has been particularly attractive to poets like Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Charles Bernstein, Steve McCaffery, Keston Sutherland, Simon Jarvis, and J.H. Prynne. For these poets, poetry is capable of offering an alternative to the violence of reductive metaphysics—which these poets have often resisted by valorising error and vagueness—by enacting cognition through particular engagements with its own formal and material conditions rather than through the generalized categories offered by thought. The poetic craft is elevated to a method of discovery, and alternatives to 'rational' thought—particularly error—are explored. Veronica Forrest-Thomson's notion of "poetic artifice" and the systematic courting of error in the theory and practice of Charles Bernstein, Steve McCaffery, and Keston Sutherland are of some interest here. I conclude with an overview of theoretical discussions by Simon Jarvis and J.H. Prynne of the operation of thought in poetry. A distinctively "poetic thought" that emerges from poetic practice is clearly what is at stake in these discussions, and difficulty can indicate the presence of such thought. It is, in other words, the nascence of thinking that emerges from and as linguistic artifact that constitutes difficulty.

My attempt in this dissertation is therefore to think of difficulty as a content-rich

phenomenon. If, as I assume, difficulty is a mode of linguistic and poetic self-awareness, then a set of strictly formal descriptions and methods of decryption will be insufficient. So at each stage, I have tried to think of difficulty and the specific formal devices that precipitate it in terms of a fully-activated referential matrix that straddles the form-content divide. This divide parallels the dualism of thoughtful, self-reflexive being and brute, unthinking materiality—a dualism that art constantly refutes through its hybrid existence as thing and concept. Difficulty in particular disturbs this dualism by emphasizing the poem's estranging materiality without (ideally) depleting its cognitive plenitude. Poetic difficulty is therefore very much an effect of the poem's localized structures of meaning and design even if it is primarily experienced as foregrounded linguistic materiality and withheld reference. Difficulty defines as well as defies sensory and conceptual boundaries, and the attenuated levels of linguistic excitation it facilitates serve to map out the terrain in which representation becomes an index of uncertainty.

CHAPTER 1

DIFFICULTY: GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Introduction

‘Difficulty’ is a word that entered the English language in the latter half of the fourteenth century. The Oxford English Dictionary indicates that the earliest recorded use of the word occurs in the Old Testament of Wyclif’s Bible (the ‘Early Version,’ c.1382): “no difficulte shal be in the prijs” (“no difficulty shall be in the price”), a translation of the Vulgate phrase “nulla erit in pretio difficultas” (*Numbers* xx.19). This accords with OED’s speculation that the word may have entered English directly from Latin rather than from French, which Stratman’s *A Middle English Dictionary*, for instance cites as the source of the word—Stratman proposes a route via the Old French *difficulté* (Stratman 164).¹ The two earliest instances cited in the OED are in fact both translations from Latin, which implies that translation might have been the route by which the word entered English.² Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* uses the word several times, but restricts it to the vocabulary of the Clerk, the Friar, and the Man of Law, all of whom would have been

¹ The OED does, however, offer the derivation via French as the standard etymology; it is in a parenthetical note that the direct entry from Latin is suggested.

² The second example (the first being the 1382 Wyclif Bible) is John Trevisa’s translation of *De Proprietatibus Rerum* by Bartholomaeus Anglicus. Trevisa spells the word ‘dyffyculte.’ The spelling ‘dyfficultye’ was also extant; it is, for instance, used by Francis Walsingham in a letter to Lord Sussex in 1578 regarding the rumours about an alliance between the Duke of Avignon and Queen Elizabeth: “[T]he expectation of the Crowne of Fraunce that is lykely to lyght uppon him which dyfficultye above all others I doe weyghe” (qtd. in Holt 1). The variant spellings might also be an effect of translation from Latin, since D.G. Scragg points out in *A History of English Spelling* that in Medieval Latin ‘i’ and ‘y’ were interchangeable graphemes. Scragg’s observations are pertinent:

The interchangeability of <i> and <y> is partly the product of Latin influence, for the two were variants in medieval Latin, and partly is caused by phonemic change, for by the end of the tenth century there are signs that the phonemes represented by the two symbols, earlier separate, had fallen together in most dialects, and it is from that period that many scribes used <i> and <y> indiscriminately. (Scragg 10)

familiar with Latin and French. As far as the Wyclif Bible is concerned, the word ‘difficulte’ was replaced with the Anglo-Saxon ‘hardnesse’ by the time the Revised Version appeared around 1388. Since the emendations in the second edition were intended to produce a less literal and Latinate translation, the far more familiar and well-established ‘hardnesse’ would have been an attractive alternative,³ particularly at a time when English was finally gaining respectability as a literary and legal language.⁴

The Teutonic ‘hard,’ whose earliest uses were limited to the sense of ‘resistant to the touch,’ seems to have served until the 15th century to describe the general experience of confronting an intransigent world. The haptic aspect of ‘hardness,’ out of which its other meanings emerged, constitutes its chief difference from the word ‘difficulty.’

‘Difficulty’ is in fact explicitly distinguished from the idea of tactile resistance in *Promptorium Parvulorum* (1440), according to which in contexts of “knowyng and werkyng,” ‘harde’ corresponds to the Latin *difficilis*, while in “towchenge and felyng,” ‘harde’ is analogous to the Latin *durus* (214).⁵ In other words, the specifically aesthetic (in the literal sense of the term) aspects of ‘hardness’ remain exclusive to the Anglo Saxon

³ Called the ‘Later Version’; it has been suggested that this version came out around 1388 (Dove 392), though there are also arguments for two revisions by Purvey, the first of which involved providing a gloss and was completed around 1390, and a subsequent revision aimed at making the language suitable for the common reader, completed around 1395 (Deansley 280). The dates of the Wyclif Bible, as indeed its authorship, are all under dispute. David Daniell argues in *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (2003) that the author of the revised version is not Purvey, just as he doubts whether the section of the Early Version attributed to Hereford was in fact the work of a single author. Daniell 66-95 contains a detailed and meticulously researched contribution to this area. For a brief overview of the history and contents of the Wyclif Bible, see Mary Dove’s “Wyclif and the English Bible”; see pages 388-92 in particular for matters of chronology and the relationship between the earlier and later versions. It would still be safe to say, however, that the text that is currently called “Revised Version” (whatever its exact date and authorship might be) replaced the earlier ‘difficulte’ with ‘hardnesse.’

⁴ See Hughes 137 for a brief description of the gradual replacement of French by English in the latter half of the fourteenth century.

⁵ The English word ‘difficulty’ or ‘difficult’ does not appear in the *Promptorium*, presumably because it is still a very uncommon word in the language. The French ‘difficile’ and ‘dur,’ whose meanings overlap in ways similar to ‘difficult’ and ‘hard,’ indicate that the distinction that the *Promptorium* establishes between ‘difficilis’ and ‘durus’ does not carry over to French, though English words derived from ‘durus’ do tend to have a stronger affinity to ‘hard.’

word, while its sense of intellectual and physical labor can, and does, extend to an Anglicized version of *difficilis*. We might speculate that sometime in the fourteenth century, English developed the need for a specialized word to handle non-material, even metaphysical, configurations of hardness; and ‘hard’ in its tactile and emotional sense as *durus*—with which word it shares the implication of endurance—can then become a descriptor for that against which both the mind and body labor in difficulty. Hardness, in the sense of *durus*, constitutes part of the substantive data derived through sensory experience since it is an empirically verifiable and quantifiable quality of things, and a measure of their resistance to external invasive force. Hardness as difficulty, however, is a far more subjective and relative experience that is associated with process: it is always encountered in the context of making and working; it is intimately linked to time, context, and expectation.

Both the static and dynamic senses of ‘hardness’ are active in the idea of “difficult poetry.” On the one hand, the fact that the adjective is attached to a generic term implies that there is a stable set of texts that can be objectively considered ‘difficult.’ And yet any attempt at specific treatment of difficulty will involve referring to prominent nodes of difficulty that can be described only in terms of intensified local effort, so that what is described is not so much an attribute as a specific transaction between reader and text. The quality of difficulty is therefore constantly on the move, which also makes for problems of definition. What do I mean when I say that a poem is difficult? At one level, I am talking about myself and my expectations from the text, the amount and quality of attention/work I am willing to expend on it, and the nature and quantity of the reward I believe I deserve for such work. I might therefore not be speaking here of

anything that exists objectively: what is difficult for me might be easy for another (or for myself in a different context). Thus the validity of a category like “difficult poetry” is especially dependent upon some sort of common consensus on how difficult an artwork can be and still not be considered essentially and primarily difficult. Though this majoritarian approach to art—like all majoritarian approaches—might be dubious in both its implementation and results, it remains the only viable approach to speaking of difficult entities in general terms. It is only too easy to prove that a supposedly simple text is in fact difficult, and that a difficult text is in fact simple—here the consensus model will restore certainty: Pindar *is* difficult, Wilfred Owen is *not*. I will therefore not trouble myself with proving that the poets I discuss are difficult in the first place: I will be satisfied with a general consensus that they are indeed difficult.

For the time being, the difficulty of certain texts and authors seems indisputable, and at least some of the lineaments of difficulty are concrete enough to validate an ‘objective’ description. Charles Bernstein’s essay “The Difficult Poem,” which was originally published as an “advice column” in *Harper’s Magazine* and republished in the optimistically-titled *Attack of the Difficult Poems*, is useful here because it speaks from beyond the twentieth century, looking back at both Modernism and perhaps also Postmodernism. Bernstein’s style here is satiric and mimics the exclamation-ridden brightness of self-help literature, but he nevertheless offers a useful set of tools for defining difficulty in poetry. There is, for instance, a “handy checklist” of diagnostic questions:

1. Do you find the poem hard to appreciate?
2. Do you find the poem’s vocabulary and syntax hard to understand?
3. Are you often struggling with the poem?
4. Does the poem make you feel inadequate or stupid as a reader?

5. Is your imagination being affected by the poem? (24)

An affirmative answer to one of these questions, he suggests, is sufficient grounds for suspecting that the poem is difficult. The value of this mock-serious list of questions is that it provides a powerful image of one half of what might be called the theater of difficulty: the befuddled reader, struggling, insulted, stupefied, disoriented. The other half arrives fairly soon, when Bernstein appends a list of more ‘objective’ qualities of the difficult poem: “high syntactic, grammatical, or intellectual activity level; elevated linguistic intensity; textual irregularities; initial withdrawal (poem not immediately available); poor adaptability (poem unsuitable for use in love letters, memorial commemoration, etc.); sensory overload; or negative mood” (24). If the reader feels stupid, the poem is intellectually active, unaccommodating, complexly structured, and often has a bad attitude. This is in fact a parody of the standard scenario that has plagued the reception of difficult poetry: the too-clever text and/or author, and the too-un-clever “normal” or “ordinary reader,” who expects all poetry to participate in social transactions such as courtship and commemoration. The staging is complete in its essentials with the righteous critic urging the impartial audience to side with the obvious underdog: the ‘ordinary,’ unskilled reader, who is targeted by this poetry precisely because of its indifference to her. The author’s attitude towards the reader ranges from aloof contempt to paternalistic attempts to educate her into being his ideal reader. Bernstein’s attitude is a half-serious version of the latter: “By sharing my experience of more than thirty years of working with difficult poems, I think I can save you both time and heartache. I may even be able to convince you that some of the most difficult poems you encounter can provide very enriching aesthetic experiences—if you understand how to

approach them” (24).

This is of course a classic Modernist scenario, which has been extensively documented in Leonard Diepeveen’s *The Difficulties of Modernism*. The last act of the drama of the offended reader was probably played out during the obscenity trial for *Howl*. The outrage produced by Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, or Duchamp’s *Fountain* can hardly be imagined in contemporary Western late-capitalist societies. When museum installations include assemblages of live naked women, dead animals, and inflatable dolls, and when the leading difficult poet appears on television to sell copies of *The Yellow Pages*, we must assume that some kind of truce has been achieved between Postmodern audiences and their difficult artists. I use the term ‘Postmodern audiences’ in the sense that this audience is at least vaguely aware of Modernism, its brilliant breakthroughs, and the history of its reception, so that difficulty as such is not shocking or even repulsive; it might even offer a general sense of comforting familiarity despite the fact that it does not by definition offer itself up for easy consumption.⁶ In other words, difficulty in Postmodern poetry is not exactly original, if poetic difficulty ever was, and the belatedness of Postmodern difficulty allows it to be placed outside the framework of confrontation and trauma.⁷ This dissertation will therefore be more interested in considering less oppositional ways in which poetic difficulty orients itself within the social sphere.

When I use the word ‘Postmodernism,’ I do not have in mind an all-

⁶ However, it must be noted that there continues to be considerable resistance to the difficult language of art percolating into other, more ‘objective’ discourses. See chapters 8 and 9 of *Just Being Difficult?*.

⁷ As Jameson observes without too much exaggeration in *Postmodernism*, even the most confrontational Postmodern works of art “no longer scandalize anyone and are not only received with the greatest complacency but have themselves become institutionalized and are at one with the official or public culture of Western society” (Jameson 4).

encompassing condition such as “the cultural logic of late capitalism,” the set of aesthetic tendencies described by Jameson as subservient to capitalistic modes of thinking, acting, and making. I use it instead in a more limited sense to refer to art that is critical of Modernism, but nevertheless is fully aware of and willing to make good use of the Modernist legacy. My corpus, which consists of the work of John Ashbery, J.H. Prynne, Peter Riley, Charles Bernstein, and Steve McCaffery, does not represent the latest developments in contemporary poetry; it does not represent the full range and innovativeness of the poetry produced in Britain and the United States since World War II; it does not even fully represent the particular “schools” to which the names of the poets I read are linked. Yet it does represent to a certain extent the poetries that contribute to what Jerome McGann recently called the “fifth postmodernism,” which he describes as the “postmodernism of Ashbery, J.H. Prynne, Oulipo, and Language Writing, the postmodernism of Thomas Pynchon, William Vollmann, and Kathy Acker, of Crozier and Longville’s English anthology *A Various Art* and Ron Silliman’s American counterpart, *In the American Tree*.” This fifth Postmodernism is the last among a series of deviations from and reactions to Modernism, and “[w]hen we speak of postmodernism today,” McGann asserts, “this fifth column is what we probably have most in mind” (*The Scholar’s Art* 57). While the dominance of this “fifth column” cannot and need not be as absolute as McGann suggests, his grouping gestures towards an Anglo-American avant-garde that might become considerably more prominent in 21st-century re-evaluations of Postmodern Anglophone poetry. McGann’s own emphasis, as far as Postmodern poetry is concerned, has been on Language Poetry and its acknowledged predecessors. My work, on the other hand, is more attentive towards Prynne, Ashbery, and Cambridge-

based poets of *A Various Art* like Peter Riley and Veronica Forrest-Thomson.

An issue that I will bracket beyond this point is the question of nomenclature. My earlier discussion of the development of the word “difficulty” might imply that the word is being fetishized to some extent. While this is not really the case, I would like briefly to suggest that ‘difficulty’ not only has a useful etymology, but also helps to mark out the particular zone of textual intransigence that is of interest here. The term ‘obscurity’ is a close contender. It has been used by Herbert Read, Veronica Forrest-Thomson, and Daniel Tiffany (among others) to describe the same phenomenon in contemporary poetry, but it is not necessarily interchangeable with ‘difficulty.’ ‘Difficulty’ describes the reader’s subjective experience, whereas ‘obscurity’ is more empirical, more involved in the description of external circumstances—as insufficiently lighted, for instance. But more importantly, ‘obscurity’ is a noun that has its verbal counterpart, and can easily be described as the product of the activity of obscuring. The condition of obscurity can thus be linguistically correlated with the intention to obscure, and can have, as Malcolm Bowie observes in *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult*, a symmetrical relation to authorial intention (Bowie ix). It is therefore not surprising that Forrest-Thomson and Tiffany prefer ‘obscurity,’ since they refer mostly to intentional obfuscation.⁸ ‘Difficulty,’

⁸ Herbert Read uses the term ‘obscurity’ in a similar sense, though he paradoxically describes the experience of obscurity in terms of light. In obscure poetry, he encounters

the poetry as a direct *impact*; a sensation of sound, and of sound allied to expressive epithet and metaphor. But in the case of George and Rilke the sensation is almost one of sight. Light seems to be involved: a visual perception. But not visual perception of the image alone; rather an intuition of a presence: in Hobbes’s phrase, a sudden glory. [...] Vision without meaning, concrete, synthetic, but held in suspense, contemplated without question. But the vision must be won; it is not immediate; it breaks on the concentrated awareness of the reader like a summer dawn. It is the experience which all so-called obscure poetry tries to communicate; but with the rarest success. [...] There is, therefore, a positive value in obscurity which must be affirmed, in opposition to those who expect poetry to be as plain as a pikestaff—or some less obscure object. (91)

Read’s essay is an important instance of the influence of Giambattista Vico on the theory and practice of difficult art. James Joyce was famously influenced by Vico; see Verene’s *Vico and Joyce*.

however, does not have a corresponding verb, and can be confronted as a condition rather than something actively and intentionally produced. Its advantage and disadvantage lie in its relative independence from authorial intention and its greater dependence on conditions of reception.

‘Obscurity’ is not the only other contender, of course. The term ‘indeterminacy’ has also been current in recent critical writings. In *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, Marjorie Perloff has effectively historicized certain modes of twentieth-century difficulty that are important for this dissertation.⁹ ‘Indeterminacy’ is in fact less dated and vague than both ‘difficulty’ and ‘obscurity’; it also sounds decidedly more ‘postmodern’ than ‘ambiguity.’ But ‘indeterminacy’ for Perloff is the certified absence of definite reference; the reader is constantly tempted with the possibility of referential clarity, but is always finally thwarted. ‘Difficulty,’ on the other hand, is not merely a form of irresolvable uncertainty of reference; it also carries the possibility of being accessible to effort—a possibility that the term ‘indeterminacy’ closes off. Difficulty introduces time into the experience of indeterminacy, and transplants it to a context of potential dissolution. It thus acquires a charmingly ephemeral quality, a willingness—at least potentially—to collapse under sufficient exegetical pressure. Daniel Tiffany rejects the term ‘difficulty’ for precisely the reason that I prefer it: difficulty is “a condition always susceptible, in principle, to the restoration of meaning” (*Infidel Poetics* 6).

In the rest of this chapter, I attempt to conceptualize difficulty through a range of social and aesthetic paradigms. The intention is to create the necessary background static against which the far more focussed chapters can address the poetry and poetics of

specific poets. The discussion will be general, essentialist, and a-historical, in the sense that I will assume that there is a fixed quality called ‘difficulty’ that endures through the centuries in the West, and that this quality has afflicted poetry at least since the early Renaissance. By making these assumptions, I hope to invest some level of objective reality into the concept so that it might eventually become possible to historicize it.

Towards a Sociology of Difficulty: Labor, Class, Community

Difficult art is a reminder of the essential fragmentation of social being. The paradox of the un-shareable aesthetic experience being evaluated *as if* it were shareable and shared—the paradox of Kant’s *sensus communis*—is part of the pathos of modern individuality.¹⁰ Imagining a hypothetical universality is as important for the efficacy of the categorical imperative as of the aesthetic judgment, yet this task is ultimately a reminder of the fictionality of the universal. Following Alasdair MacIntyre’s line of argument, one could say that the absence of concretely shared values that are not just formal criteria but also universal content-rich concepts, inscribes loss into the modern experience of community and public life.¹¹ It is in the encounter with the modern art object that active actualization of community becomes most palpable as process and task. When the art object presents itself as ‘difficult,’ it is capable of calling attention to the conventionality

⁹ Robert Shepphard has similarly used “indeterminacy” as a key term, and his reading of it contributes to the emerging consensus that indeterminacy has become one of the aesthetic devices that are deliberately used by poets rather than an effect of the reader’s inadequate training or attentiveness.

¹⁰ For Kant’s discussion of the term “sensus communis,” see *Critique of Judgment* Part I, section 40; pp. 159-62.

¹¹ See *A Short History of Ethics*, chapter 1, *passim*. MacIntyre imagines a pre-philosophical time in which terms such as ‘goodness’ and ‘justice’ had concrete and universal content rather than contingent and culturally-determined meanings. Moral philosophy becomes necessary precisely when these categories become emptied of their absolute meanings.

and fragility of the social sphere which allows us to experience ease and simplicity in our daily symbolic transactions in the economic, social, and cultural domains. Difficulty pushes community, which is otherwise imagined for pragmatic reasons as an accomplished fact, into the waiting-rooms of hope and desire. What remains in the zone of achieved reality is the opposite of community and communication—a world whose bridges are yet to be built.¹²

As I have suggested, the relationship between the words ‘hardness’ and ‘difficulty’ indicate their proximity to the mind-body division and its subsidiary dualisms. The social implications of difficult art extend this primal epistemic break into further elaborations of alienated being; notions of possession and ownership become particularly problematical. The difficult artwork represents possession as a function of effort. In *Browning’s Sordello and the Aesthetics of Difficulty*, David E. Latane documents the rhetoric of labor through which Romantic writers explained and justified their difficulty. The model was primarily participatory rather than confrontational. The poet and the reader must ‘toil’ together as brothers (in true Republican spirit) to realize the poem.¹³ Yet by the end of the nineteenth century, when skill and apprenticeship were no longer sacrosanct in art, the labor of the audience seemed increasingly disproportionate, as became evident in the

¹² Difficulty is not necessarily anti-social: in fact, it frequently forces the individual to reconceive the aesthetic experience not as potentially shared, but in fact requiring actual discussion and consultation with other individuals, either in person or by proxy, through books, video-tutorials, and other ‘guides’ and ‘companions.’

¹³ “Carlyle’s definite ideas about reading can be summarized in one word: *toil*. The reader who struggles is the reader who becomes a friend; the camaraderie of reader and writer is a sweaty bond of co-workers. Readers of this sort, few in number, become brother authors, or readerly kin to the writer” (Latané 32). Latané’s first chapter is an intriguing account of the development of an aesthetic of difficulty from Milton to Browning. Milton’s address to Urania in *Paradise Lost*—“Still govern thou my song, / Urania, and fit audience find, though few”—was, Latané points out, frequently quoted by the Romantics (15). The rest of the chapter unravels this preoccupation with a small but select audience, which leads to an image of a reader who can actively participate in the production of the poem, so that the Romantics in effect anticipated reader-response theories such as those of Wolfgang Iser (Latané 26-39).

Whistler-Ruskin trial.¹⁴ This question is still pertinent in Minimalist and other forms of highly intellectual art that have done away with its artisanal qualities. Thus even when the artist has excused himself from painstaking labor to produce the difficult work of art, the audience must continue to labor. And of course the nineteenth century, in Marxist analysis, was also a period of rapid deterioration in the quality of labor in general, with disastrous consequences for intellectually challenging leisure activities.

To a certain extent, John Wilkinson's definition of difficulty as "a demand for labour" is therefore attractive (though its shortcomings will be apparent later on in my discussion).¹⁵ The contemporary legitimacy—and even mystique—of this demand derives from the valorization of labor intrinsic to Marxist thinking and socio-political experimentation, which are themselves rooted at least partially in the so-called Protestant work ethic.¹⁶ It is only when work is declared a good in itself that difficulty can constitute the stern call to duty that it has become in versions of late-Marxist poetics.¹⁷ To remodel audiences as enabled by economic and social conditions to spend their labor power on activities that generate no monetary gain is risky at best, and even if such art is not entirely negative in Adorno's sense, it certainly seems to be radically opposed to the conditions of its own production, distribution, and reception. The distinction between labor and work must also be considered in terms of its consequences for the economic

¹⁴ Ruskin's lawyer asked whether Whistler was justified in demanding two hundred guineas for the labor of two days—the average time Whistler took to complete a painting. Whistler's reply is famous: "No. I ask it for the knowledge I have gained in the work of a lifetime" (qtd. in Burns 120).

¹⁵ The definition appears in the essay "The Loveliness of 'Linen,'" p. 116.

¹⁶ See Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The relationship between

¹⁷ The final chapter of Joshua Kotin's recent PhD dissertation is a very good example of the ways in which a perceived evasion of the labor demanded by J.H. Prynne's poetry leads to guilt and anguish. Kotin agonizes, for instance, over having googled Prynne's sources instead of undertaking the painstaking research that the text seemed to expect (Kotin 204).

production and alienation that underpin Marxist analyses of labor.¹⁸ The contrasting term ‘play’ has become a dominant counterpoint to the increasingly outmoded term ‘labor,’ and in this shifted paradigm it might be possible to read the demand for labor as an invitation to play. These oppositions are not irreconcilable, and in fact the need explicitly to replace labor and its implication of alienation led Herbert Marcuse to propose, in the 1955 *Eros and Civilization*, that work must be dissociated from labor and united instead with the concept of play through an affirmation of eros: “The irreconcilable conflict is not between work (reality principle) and Eros (pleasure principle), but between *alienated* labor (performance principle) and Eros” (*Eros and Civilization* 54). Productive work would be generated not by suppressing sexuality, as Freud suggests, but by liberating sexuality in the form of a “polymorphous” and “pregenital” eros that would make activity pleasurable in itself. Goal-driven work can thus be replaced by the self-sufficiency of erotic pleasure, which becomes analogous to play in its self-reflexivity and autonomy (*Eros and Civilization* 215).¹⁹ Such a utopia in which the distinction between work and pleasure collapses anticipates Postmodernist models of aesthesis based on play. But of course play is not as unmotivated and self-reflexive as Marcuse likes to believe, and libidinal energy is similarly complex and develops and differentiates in the context of social pressures and conditioning. His analysis, however, opens up the possibility of a Marxist approach to labor that is not limited to the Catholic account of work as punishment, the Puritan description of work as

¹⁸ In *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Marx defines work as the object of labor. For a discussion of the notion of alienated or estranged labor and its different manifestations, see Marx 71-84.

¹⁹ Compare Paul Ricoeur:

Work calls into play the power relations of man over man within the context of the relations of force between man and nature. Indeed, through work, human existence takes on the character of a rationally organized battle against nature that makes nature appear as a reservoir of forces to be

duty, or the Marxist historicization of labor as the site of alienation. At this point, one might think of difficulty's demand for 'labor' as anachronistically invoking the possibility of unalienated work.²⁰

The rejection of difficulty can be understood therefore as a result of the tensions between the unrealized notion of 'work' as inseparable from play and pleasure, and the necessary assumption in contemporary societies that playful non-goal-based activity should be restricted to clearly-designated 'leisure' hours and spaces. The artwork's demand for labor is not accompanied by any promise of commensurate compensation outside of the task, and if art's mandate is to provide pleasure, then difficult art has not yet accomplished in its functioning the separation of pleasure and work. At times, such art seems oblivious of the fact that the social context in which it is produced encourages most audiences to think of all work in terms of alienated and therefore distasteful labor that ought not to encroach into the leisure-time activity of art-consumption. Labor and pleasure are thus in general mutually exclusive, and leisure periods are to be kept clear for the other role of the worker in a capitalist society: that of the consumer. In other words, the resistance of the audience is not to labor per se, but to the encroachment of labor into the precincts of leisure and consumption. Difficult art offers models of social engagement that are not based on production or consumption as it is enacted in current societies but which are already present as hope, and as such fails to address both the goal-based labor and the effortless consumption that constitute the spiralling loops of

conquered. It is through work that the difficult becomes a fundamental aspect of reality. (*Fallible Man* 116)

²⁰ At the same time, difficulty is frequently associated with the active production of the experience of alienation, particularly in the work of the Russian Formalists. See especially Shklovsky's "Art as Device" (also translated as "Art as Technique"): "By 'enstranging' objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and 'laborious'" (*Theory of Prose* 6; I retain, though not without reservations, the term

capitalist production routines.

On the other hand, difficult art is itself can be part of capitalist activities based on a structure of systemic inequality, professionalization, and alienation, particularly since it is at least partly dependent upon the society that it critiques. An extremely able but ultimately flawed analysis of the fundamental heteronomy of difficult poetry can be found in Todd Gitlin's "Inaccessibility as Protest: Pound, Eliot, and the Situation of American Poetry." Gitlin argues that Modernist art emerges from an acute sense of the falsity of the artist's social position:

Modern writers have been dependent economically on the very bourgeois audience whose taste they have in general despised, and whose hypocrisies, deceits, cruelties, and banality have been one of their major themes. Simultaneously dependent and contemptuous, they have had to devise strategies for maintaining a sense of their professional dignity, sustaining the literary enterprise in all its nobility and capacity for truth-telling, while at the same time engaging the interest of an audience conceived to be philistine and reactionary in taste. In such a situation, writers have had to face a grinding sense of discrepancy between the mission they feel called to and the actual role they perform. (66)

This situation gives rise to difficulty as protest, not against the prevailing social conditions, but against the fact of the writer's dependence on a despised society: "The emergence of inaccessibility can be understood as a certain sort of protest, but a self-enclosed protest, against the structured situation I have described: the wrenching coexistence of the writer's economic dependency and his or her contempt for the audience" (70). Persuasive as this account is, Gitlin's biggest misstep here is to assume that the artist is always contemptuous towards her audience. The staggeringly one-sided interpretation he provides for Baudelaire's famous address to the reader ("Hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frere!") is symptomatic: "The censorious reader of the

'enstranging,' which is translator Benjamin Sher's neologism for Shklovsky's celebrated concept of 'ostranenie').

mid-nineteenth century is indicted as the hypocrite brother, the cowardly yet indispensable twin afraid to own up to the deep, exquisitely painful truths excavated at great expense by the artist for him” (63). The fact that the lines can be interpreted as indicting the author along with the reader seems to have escaped Gitlin. Yet it is this shared sense of fallenness, as I shall elaborate in chapter 4, that precipitates some of the most socially-involved versions of difficulty.

In *The Difficulties of Modernism*, Leonard Diepeveen adopts the admirable theoretical strategy of refusing to exempt difficult poetry in any way from the struggles for power and profit characteristic of most other fields of contemporary activity. The book claims that the turn to difficulty is a ‘professionalization’²¹ of art along the lines of all the other specialized modes of knowledge production, and is supported by a nexus of writers and scholars who use literary difficulty as a way of buttressing their social relevance. Modernism was undoubtedly a period in which poetry came to be linked as much with trained craftsmanship as with a characteristic state of mind or attitude towards the world. Artists, like scientists, could presume to speak to colleagues rather than to an untrained ‘public’ or ‘consumer.’ Up to this point the argument is acceptable. But without attempting to engage with difficult art in any detail—since “close reading” is itself contaminated by a vested interest in perpetuating the cult of difficulty—Diepeveen constructs his argument by analyzing statements about difficulty made by writers and their audiences, and the “anxious” and excluded reader is the prime exhibit for his thesis that there is a miscarriage of democracy at work.²² The failure of his project is ultimately

²¹ See Diepeveen 87-125.

²² See Diepeveen’s chapter 2, “Articulating Anxiety: A Theory of Difficulty,” especially pages 65-86. Also see reductive comments such as the following: “Difficulty [...] throws its reader into a state of anxiety, resulting in anger, ridicule, or boredom” (121). The book’s casual use of a generalized ‘reader’ leads to a

due to a refusal to extend the model of professionalization to its economic aspect as far as the artist is concerned: the trail of money and power, however strong in academic activities that thrive on difficult texts, grows cold in most cases before it enters the zone of artistic production. The lives of people like Wyndham Lewis, James Joyce, and Djuna Barnes who had no extraneous capital to back up their socially unproductive labor bear very little resemblance to those of tenured professors. In any case, academic readings of Modernist difficulty that are cognizant of the undeniable fact of Modernism's subsequent institutionalization need not necessarily entail academic self-flagellation.

Diepeveen's work draws upon the general suspicion that difficult art is fundamentally elitist and undemocratic, and is in fact not opposed to capitalism but colludes with its systemic injustices. The opposition between difficulty as an elitist gatekeeper and difficulty as promoting clean working-class values has quite a long history. The Puritan valorization of difficulty and the toil it elicits is best exemplified by the "Hill of Difficulty" that is part of the allegorical landscape of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*: here the proof of Christian's religious probity is his willingness to choose difficulty rather than ease and comfort:

The hill [of difficulty], though high, I covet to ascend;
The difficulty will not me offend;
For I perceive the way to life lies here:
Come, pluck up heart, let's neither faint nor fear.
Better, though *difficult*, the right way to go,
Than wrong, though *easy*, where the end is woe. (Bunyan 39; italics in the original)

And in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, of course, the right way is invariably difficult, and the Celestial City can never be reached by any easy route. Christian's decision to climb the

series of other untenable generalizations. In fact, one of the most useful effects of a difficult text is the destabilization of the notion of a singular and predictable "reader."

Hill of Difficulty is therefore an emblem for the general methodology that Bunyan prescribes for deliverance.

About three centuries before Bunyan, Giovanni Boccaccio encourages an at least superficially similar stoicism in readers of difficult poetry. His advice appears in a section of *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods* titled “The Obscurity of Poetry Is Not Just Cause for Condemning It”:

I repeat my advice to those who would appreciate poetry, and unwind its difficult involutions. You must read, you must persevere, you must sit up nights, you must inquire, and exert the utmost power of your mind. If one way does not lead to the desired meaning, take another; if obstacles arise, then still another; until, if your strength holds out, you will find that clear which at first looked dark. For we are forbidden by divine command to give that which is holy to dogs, or to cast pearls before swine. (Boccaccio 262)

At a closer glance, the concluding scriptural reference implies a more complicated position than Bunyan’s. In the sections that precede this passage, Boccaccio offers defenses of obscure poetry that can be reduced to the following two key claims: that poetry is often the product of visionary inspiration and that its primary task in these cases is not intelligibility; and that obscurity is a means that poets use, just as the Bible and the philosophers do, to veil knowledge from those unworthy of it. In this very early defense of difficult poetry (the text was composed between 1350 and 1362), there is a sense in which a stratified society and an uneven distribution of knowledge are taken for granted and considered in no way undesirable. There is a strong analogy here of the Catholic description of the scripture as a complex text that mere literacy cannot access without proper training in the entire tradition of religious theory and practice. This claim makes strategic use of the supposed difficulty of the Bible, and enables the creation of a class of people who are incapable of understanding scripture. Indeed, the verse from Matthew

that Boccaccio uses was used later in the fourteenth century by those who opposed Wyclif's project of translating the Bible into English: the pearls of wisdom—whether poetic or divine—were not to be cast before those constitutionally incapable of recognizing their value. Boccaccio's comment might imply that through hard work, the reader might transform herself from swine to jeweler, but there is a sense in which the obscurity of the poem has already sorted the swine from the sheep, and that only the rest of the transformation is achieved through effort. This now offensive anti-democratic sentiment was undoubtedly already subject to criticism, as is evident from the context of Boccaccio's defense.

Explicit discussions about difficult poetry go much further back. For instance, we can see in a troubadour poem like “Era·m Platz” tensions between an easily-accessed popular poetry and the more hermetic ‘trobar clus’ style that the poem apparently critiques. A *tenzo* composed by Giraut de Borneill between 1162 and 1173, “Era·m Platz” stages a dialogue between Giraut and a certain ‘Linhuare,’ identified by scholars as Raimbaut d’Aurenga. The terms of dialogue have not changed significantly in the intervening millennium. Linhuare, as one who favors the trobar clus, begins by asking Giraut:

Era·m platz, Guiraut de Borneill,
Que sapcha per c’anatz blasman
Trobar clus, ni per cal semblan.
Aiso·m diguatz:
Si tan prezatz
So que vas totz es cominal?
Car adonx tug seraun egal. (Giraut 394)

[Now I should like to know, Guiraut de Borneil, why you go around blaming the closed style of composition, and on what pretext. Tell me this: do you have such a high regard for what is available to everyone? For then everyone will be equal. (Giraut 397)]

:
 Giraut's replies to Linhuare cover familiar ground. He professes not to understand why a poet would "compose poetry if [he did not] wish everyone to know [his] poem immediately." When Giraut says, "I prefer to hear my melody uplifted by a child" (Giraut 396), he is invoking a primal simplicity and innocence that predates any pretension to complexity and gravity. The intelligibility of the text, Giraut implies here, is directly proportionate to the poet's egalitarian tendencies. There are also economic factors involved: as Simon Gaunt has pointed out in *Troubadours and Irony*, Linhuare/Raimbaut is a moneyed lord and can therefore afford to have a small and select audience, while Giraut is a professional troubadour and must appeal to the widest audience in order to make a living (Gaunt 168). Gaunt reads the poem, however, as an ironic indictment of those who are unable to appreciate the difficult *trobar clus* style, which Giraut himself favored but was often prevented from practicing due to his need to cater to a less sophisticated public taste (Gaunt 169-178).²³ The fact that Giraut is often listed among practitioners of *trobar clus*²⁴ would make this a very plausible thesis. But there is no doubt that the poem rehearses—ironically or otherwise—some of the arguments against *trobar clus* while caricaturing arguments in favor of it: the only supporting argument offered by Linhuare is that he disdains a condition in which all are equal, or, to read the line slightly differently, that to write simple poetry would, by suggesting that all are equal despite obvious political, economic, religious, and sexual inequalities, be an act of bad faith. If the poem is ironical, as recent criticism claims, then this insight would constitute part of its irony: Giraut was constrained by his economic circumstances to produce the

²³ See Gaunt and Marshall 479-82 for an overview of the debate around this poem and Giraut's supposed status as the champion of *trobar leu*.

²⁴ See Chambers 94.

trobar leu or the popular style, whereas the *trobar clus* was the more authentic expression of the real conditions of his poetic production.

In both Giraut and Boccaccio, the prevailing feudal system allows for an explicitly disdainful position towards easy access to meaning. Difficulty makes poetry comparable to philosophy and theology—its medieval rivals—whose pervasive difficulty, as Boccaccio points out earlier in his essay, is never condemned because of the institutional power that legitimizes these disciplines. Poetry's claim to the same privilege of difficulty that philosophy and theology—and the empirical sciences in the present day—consider their exclusive domain, is no doubt a subversive act, and has always implicitly been seen as such by its critics. What is celebrated here is not labor as such but the right to demand labor, which is an aristocratic and ecclesiastical privilege. Wilkinson's description of poetic difficulty as a demand for labor must thus be understood—if some of the *prima facie* less attractive aspects of difficulty are to be clarified—in its rich and compromised historical density. The affinity that twentieth-century difficult poetry has had towards tyrannical political systems—whether it is Fascism, Nazism, or Communism—might be traced back to the use of poetic difficulty in order to establish distance from a debased public taste. Theodor Adorno's disdain for popular culture and his great enthusiasm for difficult art is only one among numerous twentieth-century refusals to respect the opinion of the numerical majority. In Adorno's case, and in other left-leaning champions of Modernist and late-Modernist difficulty, this apparently paradoxical lack of solidarity with the masses can, of course, be explained through their rejection of ideology: ideology thrives, as Adorno has demonstrated, on the mass-produced, undemanding art of the

“culture industry.”²⁵ The incompatibility of any true equality with the partial and often purely rhetorical equality that democracy can offer makes it difficult for late-Modernist artists to retain any sympathy for the standardized consumer of art, who uses the model of purchase and consumption as the prime template for all transactions with the world.²⁶ This suspicion of ‘normal’ modes of communication and their homogenizing premise of effortless and rapid exchange of information is obviously different from Raimbaut’s or Boccaccio’s approach to difficult art, but there are family resemblances nevertheless. We might provisionally conclude that it is in no way easy to decide whether an apparently elitist position is an instance of ideology or of resistance to ideology.

There are, of course, extra-poetic contexts in which linguistic difficulty has specific socio-political functions. An obvious candidate is cryptography. In his 1921 *The Cryptography of Dante*, Walter Arensberg defines the cryptogram thus: “A cryptogram, or hidden writing, is a deliberate arrangement of words, letters, numbers or other signs, which is intended to conceal as well as to express a meaning” (3). This definition is equally appropriate for much of difficult poetry, as Arensberg demonstrates in the ensuing discussion. Encryption has a very long tradition in literature as well as in politics; when it does not present itself explicitly as encryption, it serves to address simultaneously two sets of audiences of which only one can decode both the apparent and the hidden meanings of the text. The levels of cryptographic sophistication have risen exponentially with the growth of technology and mechanically assisted modes of encryption in the

²⁵ See 94-136 of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Adorno and Horkheimer.

²⁶ Geoffrey Hill’s more rigorous redescription of democracy in the context of difficult poetry is an instance of a principled anti-populist position that does not necessarily draw on the Marxist tradition. He argues that “difficult poetry is the most democratic, because you are doing your audience the honour of supposing that they are intelligent human beings. So much of the populist poetry of today treats people as if they were fools” (Hill). Compare Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory*: “Art respects the masses by presenting itself to them as what they could be rather than by adapting itself to them in their degraded condition” (239-40).

twentieth century. The invention of the ‘enigma machine’ in Germany and the subsequent allied efforts to decode it through a combination of espionage and mathematical ingenuity are frequently cited as decisive for the outcome of World War II.²⁷ Images of secret societies and espionage conjured up by cryptic writing are in part behind the impression of exclusivity that difficult writing produces on a reader when she is placed in a position of the non-adept. Encryption cannot be conflated with elitism, however. In fact, as Daniel Tiffany has argued, many ‘secret languages’ like argots and slang originate in low culture (see discussion of the riddle starting on page 23).

The term ‘cryptography’ and related words contain a very suggestive root word—‘crypt’—which has excited much philosophico-linguistic speculation. The most important representative is no doubt Derrida’s “Fors,” written as a forward to *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* by Abraham and Torok.²⁸ Much is made of the etymology and the tropic potential of the word as Derrida circles repeatedly around the question of its meaning:

What is a crypt? No crypt presents itself. The grounds are so disposed as to disguise and to hide: something, always a body in some way. But also to disguise the act of hiding and to hide the disguise: the crypt hides as it holds. Carved out of nature, sometimes making use of probability or facts, these grounds are not natural. A crypt is never natural through and through, and if, as is well known, *physis* has a tendency to encrypt (itself), that is because it overflows its own bounds and encloses, naturally, its other, all others. The crypt is thus not a natural place but the striking history of an artifice, an *architecture*, an artifact: of a place

²⁷ See Kahn.

²⁸ Some of the most significant translations of Abraham and Torok’s theories into literary criticism can be found in the work of Nicholas Rand. See in particular *Le Cryptage et la Vie de des Œuvres*, which understands encryption and occultation in terms of the interdependence or a kind of biological ‘twinning’ of languages that is revealed through the process of translation. According to Rand, “[l]’œuvre poétique invite, à bouche cousue, un texte ou une langue occultés pour former avec eux une union gémellaire. D’où une possibilité de renouvellement de l’idée de la traduction. Deux textes établissent entre eux des rapports de renvoi bilatéraux : ils constituent des interprétations réciproques l’un de l’autre” (13). And he makes the characteristic Postmodern move of refusing to ratify the distinction between the original and the copy (13). This resolution of the difficult text into a doubled selfhood parallels Rand’s understanding of the hermetic text as a recreation of the internalization and encryption of human trauma (15-16, and *passim*).

comprehended within another but rigorously separate from it, isolated from general space by partitions, an enclosure, an enclave. So as to purloin *the thing* from the rest. (xiv)

Encrypted writing, to use Derrida's tropology, is the fabrication of subterranean spaces from the homogenized linguistic and conceptual public sphere.²⁹ In our increasingly digitalized world, encryption might be the only means of carving out a private space away from the governmental and commercial surveillance to which our electronic transactions are subjected. In *The Cryptographic Imagination: Secret Writing from Edgar Poe to the Internet*, a truly brilliant and groundbreaking historicization of literary encryption, Shawn Rosenheim gives a graphic account of the ways in which governments continue to work assiduously to make sure that the ordinary citizen is denied access to strong means of encrypting private data (171-79; all of chapter 7 and the appendix—pp. 209-12—are relevant in this regard). The claim to anonymity and privacy in public spaces (outside of which they are meaningless in any case)—including the virtual public spaces of the internet—has always been censured on principle because it violates the laws of mutual control and monitoring that supports societies: as a matter of fact, such controls are easier to establish and much stronger in pre-industrial and village economies. Privacy has thus always been a space that has to be imagined and crafted into being rather than an a-priori condition of

²⁹ The translator's decision to use "purloin" for "soustraire" (usually translated as 'subtract') is inspired, since the English word invokes Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" and Poe's own interest in cryptography that made him particularly attractive to French readers. It is unlikely that there is a strong allusion to Poe in Derrida's original text, however; "The Purloined Letter" is generally translated as "Le Lettre Volée." Derrida seems to be playing instead on the sense of interment implicit in the 'sous' in 'soustraire.' Here is the original passage:

Qu'est-ce qu'une crypte? Une crypte ne se présente pas. Une certaine disposition des lieux est aménagée pour dissimuler: quelque chose, toujours un corps de quelque façon. Mais pour dissimuler aussi la dissimulation: la crypte qui d'elle-même se cèle tout autant qu'elle recèle. Taillés dans la nature, en exploitant parfois les chances ou les données, ces lieux ne sont pas naturels. Une crypte n'est jamais, de part en part, naturelle et si la *physis* aime, comme on sait, à (se) crypter, c'est qu'elle se déborde pour enfermer, naturellement, son autre, tous ses autres. La crypte, n'est donc pas un lieu naturel, mais l'histoire marquante d'un artifice, une architecture, un artefact: d'un

subjectivity that is later violated through public scrutiny. Gestures that suggest a space segregated from the public domain trigger automatic resistance from the notion of open space, which is created purely through communicative homogeneity and has long ago lost any association with an actual physical space. The difficult lyric, whose speaking voices are often filtered through multiple layers of refraction and dislocation, constitutes a mode of complex anonymity: the author declares herself, but the speech cannot be effectively plotted back to authorial intention. The model of public-key cryptography can be entirely apposite here, despite the anachronism.

The best example of the use of the concept of cryptography in understanding lyric poetry is Shoptaw's long and transhistorical essay "Lyric Cryptography." For Shoptaw, the "crypt word," refers to the familiar and expected words that hover around an unusual and surprising word or expression in poetry (e.g. the more predictable "blind assassin" can thus be the inferred starting point for the "blond assassin" in Dickinson). Saussure's work on anagrams and its discovery by Poststructuralists set the precedent for Shoptaw's approach, as he acknowledges. But Saussure also indicates the conditions under which these shadowy meanings can be talked about at all: the decline of authorial intention in textual readings has liberated what would otherwise have been merely furtive and unsanctioned pleasures that the reader experiences in private. And consistent with Shoptaw's general tendency to invite history into his brilliant close-readings, this essay too has flashes of historicization—the most prominent instance being his reading of Auden's "Musée du Beaux Ars." But Shoptaw's argument is generally antagonistic to the model of encryption imagined as composed of the code and its plain text, as this entails the

lieu *compris* dans un autre mais rigoureusement séparé de lui, isolé de l'espace général par cloisons, clôture, enclave. Pour lui soustraire la chose. (*Cryptonymie* 12).

subservience of the encoded text to the decoded text. In Shoptaw, the problems inherent in replacing uncertainty with certainty are defused through the near-fictive quality of many of the observed hidden words. This marginal reality of crypt words makes remembering/recognition and forgetting as useful a dualism as encryption and decryption: in the presence of the strange, the familiar reappears as the phantom of its imperfect realization. Shoptaw's reading offers a means to re-introduce depth into the flat surfaces that are typical of postmodern topographies, even the smooth surfaces of John Ashbery's poetry, and his work remains unparalleled in Ashbery criticism.³⁰

We must also consider the very long artisanal tradition of deliberately generating incomprehension in the reader through riddles, which are often considered equivalent to the cryptograms, though there are significant differences. Sanskrit texts on poetics, for instance, approve of the use of the *prabelika* or riddle as a means of secret communication. The riddle is a test of the imagination and the riddlee's ability to view the world in terms of equivalences and substitutions—the key word is *test*—so that it does not so much exclude as offer a challenging route to inclusion.³¹ Riddles thus constitute a second-order tier of mimesis³² in the form of analogy: the pleasure they give

³⁰ David Herd, however, criticizes Shoptaw for making terms such as 'misrepresentation' and 'cryptology' central to his analysis since these were not words used by Ashbery himself (Herd 5). See Jameson's *Postmodernism* for a very influential account of Postmodern flatness.

³¹ Riddling as a poetic device is not restricted to the Western tradition, of course. For example, see Salomon for an overview of the theory and practice of literary riddles in Sanskrit poetry. The status of the Sanskrit riddle, or *prabelika*, as a genuine trope or *alamkara* was even more marginal than in Greek and Latin poetry, however, and as in Greek and Latin rhetoric and poetics, strong restrictions were placed on them, partly because their encrypted language could host sexual and other tabooed content (Salomon 171). Salomon argues that the riddle persists in other more respectable figures of speech like *virodhabhaasa* (something like the oxymoron or paradox) that not only uses puns and other devices in ways similar to how they are used in riddles, but are also frequently employed to describe the "cosmic enigma" (Salomon 176). A similar tendency to procure literary respectability for the riddle through linking it up with the profound 'riddles' of existence can be seen in Cook's essay (see f.n. 34 and page 28-29) as well.

³² Much of the difficult poetry of the twentieth century is partially analogous to the second kind of mimesis proposed by Erich Auerbach: a form of representation that is characterised by parataxis, large gaps in narration, moments of illumination accompanied by vast stretches of obscurity, and the consequent

is by making explicit the act of interpretation itself. Andrew Welsh's *Roots of Lyric* calls attention to the riddle as one of the prime elements of lyric modes of disclosure and knowing. He considers the riddle a modality of naming associated with the pictorial and spatial aspects of language (46).³³

In *Infidel Poetics: Riddles, Nightlife, Substance*—the most important recent work on the relationship between difficult poetry and the riddle—Daniel Tiffany offers a reading of the riddle's traditional role as social and metaphysical gatekeeper.³⁴ His analysis helps to invert to a certain extent the charge of difficulty's collusion with the beneficiaries and engineers of socio-economic imbalances of power. Instead of the usual linkage of difficulty and elitism, Tiffany offers a model of poetic obscurity (he prefers this term to 'difficulty' because of the latter's emphasis on hermeneutics) that is realigned with marginalized linguistic performances, including dialect, cant, and slang.³⁵ This opens up the possibility of conceiving the sublime—a traditional aesthetic counterpart of difficulty—not in terms of elevation but declivity:

[L]iterary conceptions of obscurity may be rooted in the social *misunderstanding* of demotic speech, thereby shifting the phenomenology of obscurity away from its

deepening of the textual space into foreground and background. Such texts (and the Old Testament is Auerbach's prime example) demand rather than merely allow for interpretation; their authority is founded on their mysteriousness (Auerbach 8-23). This model is closer to difficulty as it appears in Modernism, of course, particularly in the matter of depth. Postmodernism has famously involved a flattening of conceptual space, and interpretation itself is often rendered redundant by the superficiality of the text.

³³ See chapter 2 of *Roots of Lyric*.

³⁴ Cook's analysis also offers this as a function of the riddle, which is particularly important in the image of the sphinx whose importance as a riddling creature must have been responsible for its presence as a traditional gatekeeper between life and death: sphinxes are a standard sculptural motif in archaic Greek tombstones.

³⁵ This is not the first time that poetic difficulty has been linked by its apologists to explicitly demotic, 'low-culture' social and communicative contexts. In *The Chequer'd Shade: Reflections on Obscurity in Poetry*, John Press makes a similar point, though much less rigorously:

The rich folklore of the countryside, the nutty flavour of regional dialect and the highly sophisticated language of the poet are linked together by an instinctive sympathy for as Logan Pearsall Smith remarked, 'both the peasant and the literary artist employ, after all, much the same kind of language; both are connected more with life and idiom than with dictionaries and the rules of grammar. (8)

conventional association with elite culture and toward the lyric vernacular—especially poems composed in slang, jargon, or dialect. From the perspective of the educated elite, therefore, lyric obscurity, by its ability to evoke the dangerous speech of various social underworlds, produces a kind of *sociological* sublime—a significant revision of theories linking poetry and the sublime. Instead of reinforcing the traditional association of sublimity and elevation, lyric obscurity may trigger a variation of the sublime associated with the abject: a vernacular sublime (a disposition inherent in the etymological—and dialectical—correspondence between the terms “sublime” and “subliminal”). (8)

Though this model of a vernacular and vulgar difficulty is a useful and inspired corrective to the excessive focus that has been placed on the relationship between difficulty and high culture, it should be obvious that it cannot account for all aspects of difficulty: poetry, as opposed to song, does receive considerable endorsement and patronage from those who possess disproportionately large holdings of economic and political power, and the affordability of difficulty is undoubtedly determined by such alliances. But Tiffany’s larger argument that lyric obscurity is an index of the fragmentation of society into discontinuous and mutually unintelligible social groups is extremely pertinent, and offers a theoretically illuminating position that does not advert to the motif of the Holocaust or similar historical calamities as definitive occasions for poetic difficulty.³⁶ His work also reminds us—even though he does not discuss it—of the archaic function of the riddle as mediator between different states of being and knowing.

The definitive work in the relationship between European poetry and the riddle is undoubtedly Eleanor Cook’s *Enigmas and Riddles in Literature* (2006), along with the earlier essay “The Figure of Enigma: Rhetoric, History, Poetry” (2001) in which many of her

³⁶ One cannot help, however, taking issue with his desire to take the question of lyric obscurity away from issues of composition and interpretation: he rejects the term ‘difficulty’ precisely because of its emphasis on principles of construction and exegesis and the hope of retrieving meaning. Also, considering the importance of Heidegger’s theory of *Dasein* and poetry for Tiffany, it is particularly surprising that he finds it possible to reject issues of *techné*, *poesis*, and compositionality from lyric obscurity. In order to promote his own very original reading, Tiffany ends up taking the dubious but common route of dismissing all alternative approaches.

ideas are tried out. Cook points out that the riddle has been part of the poet's aesthetic repertoire at least since the time of Aristotle, who lists the riddle or the enigma as related to metaphor ("metaphors imply riddles, and therefore a good riddle can furnish a good metaphor" (*Rhetoric* Book 2); by the third century AD, the enigma was classed under the relatively new term 'allegory,' and as a species of allegory, Cook tells us in "The Figure of Enigma" "it stayed for centuries" (358).³⁷ According to Aquinas, enigma is in fact definitive of allegory, though separate from it: "omne aenigma allegoria est, non omnis allegoria aenigma est" (qtd. in Cook 353). Her encyclopaedic survey culminates in an inspired reading of the poetry of Wallace Stevens. Her model, however, is somewhat static, and she does not consider seriously the possibility that the Postmodern riddle might radically change the riddle format. It is in fact a frequent tendency in Postmodern poetry to erase the playful aspect of the riddle by breaking down the structure of authority that is implicit in traditional riddling situations, and providing half-riddles for which the questioner is as much in the dark as the reader: to this extent, the riddle merges into the idea of 'mystery' in both the secular and religious senses of the word. Perhaps the most important consequence of Cook's study for this discussion is the possibility that if the enigma is considered a trope—as it was until relatively recently—then we could think of the deliberate use of difficulty in poetry as an elaboration of the enigma's tropic scope; the standard experience connected with the trope of difficulty would be an encounter with a node of intensified resistance.³⁸ There would, in other words, be a strong historical precedent for considering difficulty as part of the artifice of poetry rather than purely a product of the reader's experience of the text.

³⁷ See chapter 2 of Cook's *Enigmas and Riddles in Literature* for the history of the enigma as trope.

Taxonomies of Difficulty

When contemporary critics have explicitly addressed poetic difficulty, they have usually treated it as a rhetorical figure. I do not mean by this that they include it, as classical rhetoric does with the enigma, as a mode of allegory or some other figure. But difficulty is implicitly installed as a rhetorical figure in several contemporary discussions by establishing subdivisions and hierarchies within the concept. Their treatment of difficulty formally resembles the standard approach to any linguistic device in the rhetorical tradition—Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* is in this sense a very traditional text. The most widely cited taxonomy of difficulty is George Steiner's essay "On Difficulty," which offers a fourfold classification of poetic difficulty into 'contingent,' 'modal,' 'tactical,' and 'ontological' difficulties. His tentative and at the same time masterful analysis,³⁹ whose scope covers virtually all of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a short but brilliant early Poststructuralist performance (the essay was first published in 1978). The significance of his work does not arise from the fact that he was the first to discuss poetic difficulty—he was not. But he was the first to engage explicitly and at length with the problem of poetic difficulty, and to invent a taxonomy for it: and the taxonomizer arguably has an Adamic claim to the entity that he has named into linguistic being. In this sense, his contribution with respect to difficulty is similar to Empson's work on ambiguity; indeed, Steiner appears to owe a clear methodological debt to

³⁸ Here one is reminded of George Molnar's proposal that all properties must be taken as tropes in order to reconcile realism and nominalism (Molnar 23 and *passim*).

³⁹ The concluding sentence of the essay is a good example of the self-satisfied hesitation with which the typology is offered: "The classification into contingent, modal, tactical and ontological difficulties put forward in this paper is, obviously, rough, and preliminary. But it would be unusual if any of the difficulties actually met with in poetry, and in literary texts as a whole, were irreducible to one of these four types or to the manifold combinations between them" (276).

Empson in that for both critics, developing a typology is the means for deriving a description of hitherto untheorized, abstract, labile, and possibly purely subjective qualities generated by the encounter with poetry. William Christie has pointed out that Steiner was rather late in calling for a “theory of difficulty” when theorizations of difficulty have been continuously produced in the twentieth century by poets and theorists including the Russian Formalists, the Frankfurt School, and the New Critics. In the preceding sections of this chapter, I have in fact implied that this theoretical interest goes back at least to the Middle Ages. However, Steiner’s sense of ‘theory’ is a sustained and ‘philosophical’ engagement with the concept of difficulty rather than merely defenses of difficulty (usually by poets but also by activist-scholars) or occasional remarks on problems of interpretation that scholars inevitably make while navigating complex literary works.⁴⁰ In this sense, difficulty—unlike notions such as ‘mimesis,’ ‘narrative,’ or ‘irony,’—is still without a theoretical framework.

Steiner’s essay is an important effort in this direction. His schema is simple enough and is based on an implicit methodology of cause and effect: what causes an instance of difficulty, he seems to ask, and what sort of response does it prompt in the reader? When the cause of the difficulty is a local lack of information that can be solved by “looking up” a word or some larger string of information, we have contingent difficulty. Modal difficulty arises when the entire context of the poem is alien due to cultural and or temporal distance: specific information will not relieve our inability to bridge the mental, moral, and conceptual abyss between the text and ourselves. This

⁴⁰ William Christie observes in “A Recent History of Poetic Difficulty” that “innumerable [...] theories [of difficulty] can be found in formal and informal manifestos from Modernism through Dadaism and Surrealism to postmodernism, and more still reconstructed from the enormous amount of academic commentary” (Christie 542).

mode of difficulty challenges our claim to universal sympathy and demands a “genuine re-adjustment or artifice of sensibility” (273). ‘Tactical difficulty, Steiner’s third kind of difficulty, is a deliberate obfuscating gesture made by an author for personal, political, or aesthetic reasons. The author might wish to keep her lover’s name or the subject of her jibes undisclosed for tactical reasons. But there is also “an entire poetic of tactical difficulty” that arises from the poet’s desire to renew everyday language through authentic and original reconfigurations (270). The result might be “logical terrorists” who take this desire to absurd lengths and create an entirely new language that the reader has to learn; or, more frequently, we find a compromise:

He [the poet] will not forge a new tongue but will attempt to re-vitalize, to cleanse “the words of the tribe” [...]. He will re-animate lexical and grammatical resources that have fallen out of use. He will melt and inflect words into neological shapes. He will labor to undermine, through distortion, through hyperbolic augment, through elision and displacement, the banal and constricting determinations of ordinary, public syntax. The effects which he aims at can vary widely: they extend from the subtlest of momentary shocks, that unsettling of expectation which comes with a conceit in Metaphysical verse, to the bewildering obscurity of Mallarmé and the modernists. (270)

Unlike contingent difficulty, tactical difficulty cannot be solved because it is built into the structure of the poet’s language, and contributes to the poem’s intended effect; the ideal reader will recognize the difficulty as part of the poem’s communicative act. The influence of the Frankfurt School, particularly Walter Benjamin, is evident here: one of Benjamin’s many lasting contributions to aesthetics is the introduction of the term “shock” as a viable aesthetic term.

Consistent with the trajectory of the Frankfurt School and poststructuralism, and

the apocalyptic and lapsarian narratives that inform much of Steiner's own work,⁴¹ his fourth kind of difficulty—"ontological" difficulty, removes the element of authorial design to create a form of difficulty that breaks the "contract [between author and reader] of ultimate or preponderant intelligibility." It thereby calls into question the fundamental assumptions about the nature and function of language: "Ontological difficulties confront us with blank questions about the nature of human speech, about the status of significance, about the necessity and purpose of the construct which we have, with more or less rough and ready consensus, come to perceive as a poem" (273). This mode of difficulty appears to be a typical twentieth-century phenomenon, caused, among other things, by the failure of the revolutionary possibilities that were available to the Romantics, the rise of prose fiction, and the consequent need to re-enchant poetry through magic; the need to overcome the "exemplariness" of the poetry of the past through esotericism; and "the inauthentic situation of a man in an environment of eroded speech"—Heidegger is invoked here as a theorist of ontological difficulty (274). The classic instance of ontological difficulty is, for Steiner, the poetry of the Jewish Holocaust survivor Paul Celan. The reader's response, like that of the Holocaust survivor, is to bear witness rather than find meaning: "[W]e bear witness to its precarious possibility of existence in an 'open' space of collisions, of momentary fusions between word and

⁴¹ In its architecture, "On Difficulty" is a fascinating blend of Structuralist schematism deployed in the interests of clarity, and the incipient poststructuralist interest in the philosophical possibilities offered by an ontologically obscure world. In fact, the year 1978 also saw the posthumous publication of another extended treatment of poetic difficulty which uses an even more strongly Empsonian paradigm while showing great sensitivity to the new insights of Poststructuralism. I refer here to Veronica Forrest-Thomson's *Poetic Artifice*, which I will discuss in chapter 5. The point I wish to make here is that in the late 1970s, it was possible to indulge in taxonomies and schemata while shifting one's allegiances to Poststructuralism. Beyond that point, literary theorists have generally stayed away from the paradoxical task of clarifying the abstract notion of poetic difficulty, especially since at this point difficulty becomes theoretically incorporated into all communicative acts, so that Steiner's satisfaction that he had produced a fairly exhaustive typology of difficulty is itself highly historical. Very soon, any such endeavor will have to

referent” (275). This is no deliberate obfuscation, and the reader intuits an earnestness and urgency in the poem without being able to paraphrase the specific content of that gesture precisely because it does not emerge from authorial intention, and its telos is not interpretation.

Most of the possible objections to Steiner’s apparatus have, I think, been persuasively articulated by John Vincent in the introductory chapter of in *Queer Lyrics: Difficulty and Closure in American Poetry*. Vincent points out that Steiner’s framework is restricted by the implicit assumption of a homogeneous audience that seeks only intellectually to understand the meaning of the poem. Vincent imputes a kind of ontological difficulty to the concept of difficulty itself: “[T]he flux of [difficulty’s] status as something describable is fundamental to its constitution and must be central to any definitional project” (12). One of his major contributions to thinking about difficulty, and something to which Steiner does not give systematic consideration, is the affective response to difficulty. Calling attention to “difficulty’s party mix of affect,” Vincent observes that “boredom, disenchantment, fear, shame, and even disgust are likely components of [the] desire and excitement [generated by difficulty]” (12). Vincent’s book goes on to explore such contradictory feelings evoked by both the encounter and the practice of difficulty, giving up the typological precedent more or less completely.

Yet the existence of a number of expansions of and emendations to Steiner’s schema affirms the lasting value of his work. John Wilkinson’s taxonomy does not explicitly refer to Steiner, and is presented as the byproduct of an attempt to read James Schuyler’s poem “Linen,” but it nevertheless belongs to the same project. Wilkinson

be undertaken under the sign of irony, and historicizations in the line of Christie or Diepeveen, rather than stationary and transhistorical typologies, will become the standard approach to the difficult text.

begins with a preliminary division: “A basic distinction can be drawn between a literary object that is hard to place or account for, and a literary object demanding a labor of exegesis promising other terms. Thus extreme apparent simplicity may present difficulties, while exceedingly dense and intricate literary objects may be perceived to yield gracefully to the exegetical machine” (116-17). He is unique in acknowledging the fact that institutionalized forms of difficulty need not really be ‘difficult’ anymore, and that apparently simple poems present difficulties that might be hard to negotiate using the classic tools, for instance, of New Criticism. Wilkinson follows this up with further subcategories: “The Disconcerting, The Incoherent, The Complicated, The Resistant, and The Enigmatic” (117)—there is certainly a generous dose of irony in the obtrusive majuscules in this nomenclature. But a useful set of distinctions does follow. “The Disconcerting” arises from displacement—once it is contextualized, its difficulty vanishes. “The Incoherent” fails to cohere along a prescribed set of readerly expectations, and might vanish with a shift in standards of judgment. “The Complicated” poem needs a critical guide, glosses, and explanatory notes (a variety, therefore, of contingent difficulty with shades of modal difficulty). “Resistant poetry,” on the other hand, “deliberately sets up difficulties. Its major impulse is pedagogical; that is, such poetry is in the business of *training* its reader” (118). This addition of the pedagogical impulse to the medley of motives for difficulty is a useful extension of Steiner’s “tactical difficulty.”

And finally, as in Steiner, we have the privileged category—if it is “ontological difficulty” for him, for Wilkinson it is The Enigma:

The Enigmatic poem is rarely achieved and seems to require either the poet’s isolation, as with Emily Dickinson or early William Blake, or else an historical

shift whose immense force as it were crystallises, for instance in early poems by William Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge, or in late poems by Thomas Hardy and W. B. Yeats. A more recent example would be J. H. Prynne's 'Es lebe der König' and indeed much of *Brass*, the book containing that poem. [...] Enigmatic poems tend to be scarce in a poet's work; to seek after the enigmatic leads to portentousness or affected mysticism. But most poets badly want to produce the enigmatic poem, the object of fascination which will gather readers, and throughout its indefinite half-life will seem itself to produce the conjectures its readers come to entertain. The lovely poem is less than this. The beautiful poem is less than this. Such a poem presents itself as self-transcendent material. The reader knows such a poem surpasses all his or her ingenuity. It does not need its readers; its readers need the poem. (118)

The best kind of difficult poem—the enigmatic poem—cannot be composed deliberately: it is, if you will, the product of a poetic *Gelassenheit* that allows extreme interiority or historical consciousness to bypass the volition of the poet and express itself directly in the poem. It remains outside the control of both author and reader and indeed of itself. This again points to the puzzle without solution, yet a puzzle nevertheless, because it does not reject the possibility of solutions even though failing fully to support a single and authoritative one. Difficulty here seems to unite both reader and author by excluding both from its unrelenting enigma. To a certain extent, Wilkinson's formulation of difficulty seeks to transcend the inside-outside dialectic that seems generally to govern the experience of difficulty: both reader and author are within the same alienated space as a result of being excluded from the supreme self-sufficiency and intransitive plenitude (note the repetition of the phrase "less than this") of the enigmatic poem. Wilkinson's description is a strong reminder of the kinds of rifts highlighted by the experience of difficulty; Steiner's "ontological difficulty" also functions in a similar manner to free the poet from the burden of being the deliberate orchestrator of difficulty.

These are not the only two taxonomies in circulation, of course. Reginald Shepherd's taxonomy of poetic difficulty is quite elaborate, though it does not add

anything that is wildly new, making a number of fine distinctions instead.⁴² I will presently discuss Veronica Forrest-Thomson's classification of difficulty in the context of artifice. But Steiner and Wilkinson provide two similar accounts that tend towards a mode of sublimity to which difficulty—like the enigma and the cryptogram—is close in its more extreme moments. Both taxonomies escalate to a variety of mysticism (despite Wilkinson's dislike for that term). At these moments, difficulty is certainly no mere poetic technique, but another device to be used by the author to create calculated effects. What seems to be proposed here is precisely the opposite of the artisanal attitude towards difficulty: of sublime otherness that is the only palpable affirmation of both the self and the not-self. If in the same essay Wilkinson describes difficulty as a "demand for labour," it appears that it is by negating this demand that the difficult poem achieves self-sufficiency, freeing itself from both authorial design and readerly manipulation. This is part of the utopian dream of unalienated and unexploited existence that art resolutely retains within its horizon. This transcendental moment of difficulty must then be an essential component of any aesthetic of difficulty.

Wilkinson's formulation of difficulty as a 'demand' for labor is limited also

⁴² Shepherd's typology of difficulty is explicitly based on Steiner's, but offers additional distinctions and takes out the somewhat numinous ontological difficulty. "Lexical difficulty" arises from the appearance of unfamiliar words in the poem while "allusive difficulty" occurs when "the poet refers to something we've not heard of, assumes a piece of knowledge we don't have" (37); they clearly include Steiner's contingent difficulty as well as corners of his modal difficulty. At this point, Shepherd shifts to a stronger grammatical register and proposes three more kinds of difficulty: syntactic, semantic, and formal. Syntactical difficulty: "the obstacle of complex, unfamiliar, dislocated, broken, or incomplete syntax: one cannot discern or reconstruct the relations of the grammatical units." In semantic difficulty, "we have trouble determining or deciding what a poem says or means, we cannot immediately decipher or interpret it" (38). There are two kinds of semantic difficulty: difficulty of explication and difficulty of interpretation. Explicative difficulty involves the reader being unable to decipher the literal sense of the poem. In interpretive difficulty, "one grasps what is being said on the literal level, but doesn't know what it means, what it is meant to do." The example here is John Ashbery's poems, which are "syntactically and explicatively clear," but interpretively obscure. (39) Finally, we have another interesting category, which Shepherd considers a version of modal difficulty, in which the poem's structure is elusive, or is not classifiable into a known kind of poem for which there are pre-established strategies of reading (39).

because difficult art cannot really communicate with its audience through efficacious commands. The artwork can appear to demand labor, but the compulsion to accede to this demand is not the same as that which arises from a similar demand made by the factory-owner, slave-owner, or other figures powerful enough to coerce compliance. The secularized artwork can do nothing to enforce its demand,⁴³ calling the category of ‘demand’ itself into question, since what we have is the semblance of a demand unsupported by the power structures that alone can guarantee its legitimacy and efficacy. If we can therefore imagine the difficult poem as incapable of issuing compelling imperatives, and indeed as not involved in extracting any sort of response or reciprocity from the reader, then we could think of difficulty’s relationship to labor in terms of ontology rather than exchange. Unlike ‘obscurity,’ ‘mysteriousness,’ ‘indeterminacy,’ and related concepts, difficulty is capable of representing the subject-object relation as mediated through effort. The lack of clear rewards and resolutions in Postmodern poetry makes this effort an end in itself, accentuating the ritual quality of the work involved.

Aesthetics of Difficulty

The fact that Oxford University Press’s *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (1998) has an entry titled “Difficulty, Aesthetics of” signals that difficulty has become a sufficiently objective aesthetic term to merit standalone discussions. The very helpful and synoptic article (written by Marina van Zuylen, who has a book on difficulty and the novel)

⁴³ Compare, for instance, the precariousness of the command “You must change your life” (“Du mußt dein Leben ändern”) emanating from the broken statue ravaged by time (and perhaps by iconoclastic fervor) in Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of Apollo” (Rilke 60-61). The poem attempts to reinvest the fragment with the continuity of life through Dionysian motifs both vegetal and animal, but the final imperative at which the sonnet arrives through its description remains disengaged and unmotivated: rather than a genuine order, the

focuses upon the increasingly explicit aestheticization of difficulty from Kant to the Frankfurt School and Poststructuralism, and the concurrent intensification of difficulty in Western works of art. A more argumentatively dense though less comprehensive overview of a similar terrain can be found in Robert Kauffman's "Difficulty in Modern Poetry and Aesthetics." As the title suggests, it is poetry that grounds his discussion, and he is concerned with the social usefulness of difficult art as it is articulated by Frankfurt School thinkers, primarily Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. His conclusion compacts an entire tradition of reading the difficulty of lyric poetry as an indication of the urgency of critique: "[The experimental lyric may] help demonstrate—or stimulate—a critical subjectivity that asks about how to know the coordinates of a much-changed world and about how to refashion knowledge-processes themselves" (154). Variations of this position remain the most significant validation of the social value and indeed necessity of an art that has abandoned the task of beauty and resorts instead to radical forms of alienation and internal and external discontinuities.

Kant famously introduces the notion of common sense in his *Critique of Judgment* as an extra-rational means of validating the universality of aesthetic categories. The fictionality of this community of consensus gives a "memorial" quality to aesthetic judgments, as J.M. Bernstein notes: "[I]n making aesthetic judgements we judge things 'as if' from the perspective of our lost common sense, a common sense that may never have existed [...]. This 'remembered' common sense is, as Kant has it throughout the third *Critique*, both presupposed in the judgement of taste and yet to be obtained" (*The Fate of Art* 60). The fictionality of community is most obvious in the case of difficult art which

compulsion expressed by the auxiliary 'müssen' can be read as the poem's own desire—rather than manifest ability or right—to affirm the creative imagination as a genuine legislative force.

rejects the pleasing harmonies of beauty that ought to call into being the harmonious synchronization of rationality. Post-Kantian approaches to and manifestations of aestheticized difficulty are qualitatively different from earlier modes of linguistic difficulty. While the riddle and the cryptogram continue to be of interest as metaphors for difficult art (and psychoanalysis)⁴⁴ into the twentieth century, they do not completely suffice as models for developments in difficult writing after Romanticism. One of the reasons, as I suggested earlier, is that no single solution is offered to what appears to have the structure of the riddle or the cryptogram: the possibility of the empty crypt cannot be ruled out. The other reason is that solving the riddle might not really be the game that the difficult artwork initiates; the impenetrability might be a structural component, like the brickwork and masonry that makes windows possible. In the concept of the sublime that was influential in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the companion concept of Romantic irony, we have models of difficulty that express a need to transcend the idea of the work of art as communication, which reflects to some extent a resistance to the translatability of the human subject. If such an aesthetic installs the human subject as ultimately unparsable and therefore entirely autonomous and self-possessed, it also indicates loss of communal being and the privatization of transcendence.

The Sublime and Irony

The Enlightenment rejection of dogmatism rests upon the assumption that everything, potentially and by default, is comprehensible, so that superstitions could be

⁴⁴ See Tucker's *Reading Riddles: Rhetorics of Obscurity from Romanticism to Freud*.

systematically rounded up, denounced, and brought to the block.⁴⁵ The most paradoxical and spectacular object to emerge into the Enlightenment from the murk of irrationality is the sublime. If empirical experience, rather than received wisdom, was to be the source of knowledge, the sublime, which is a violent onslaught on the senses, becomes experience that has bypassed intellectual processing and awed us into submission precisely due to this imperious form of entry into consciousness.⁴⁶ Boileau's 1674 translation of Longinus' *Peri Hupsous* as "*Traiti du Sublime*" alerted European thought to a universally available experience that appeared to have all the insignia of religious ecstasy without bearing any necessary relationship to religion—rather, the source of the sublime in Longinus' version was the secular arts, specifically the verbal arts.⁴⁷ But it is the psychologically inflected passages in Longinus, such as the one below, that would be crucial to eighteenth-century discussions, particularly if these discussions are seen as culminating in the Kantian sublime:

There is a serious turn, an inborn Sedateness in the Mind, which renders Images of Terror grateful and engaging. Agreeable Sensations are not only produced by bright and lively Objects, but sometimes by such as are gloomy and solemn. It is not the blue Sky, the cheerful Sun-shine, or the smiling Landscape, that gives us all our Pleasure, since we are indebted for no little share of it to the silent Night, the distant howling Wilderness, the melancholy Grot, the dark Wood, and hanging Precipice. (Ashfield and de Bolla 18)

By the time it became the center of attention in British empiricist circles, it was this

⁴⁵ Thomas Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica: Or Enquiries into Very Many Received Tenets and Commonly Presumed Truths* is a good instance of this project of demystification.

⁴⁶ Kant will, of course, reverse the movement of the sublime into a purely internal process projected outwards—the metaphors of transgression and ravishment common in descriptions of sublimity lose their force in this formulation. See my discussion of Kant on page 39-40.

⁴⁷ This is not to deny the explicit references to 'divine' powers and even the Old Testament in *Peri Hupsos*, but the text is explicitly structured as a rhetorical manual and draws examples mostly from pagan texts ranging from Homer to Sappho. See Shaw 19-23 for a brief summary of this aspect of Longinus. For an analysis of the impact of Boileau's translation, see Monk's chapter "Boileau and Silvain." For a partial refutation of the generally accepted wisdom that the publication of Boileau's translation was the most important event in the modern history of the sublime, see Axelsson.

paradoxical pleasure in the face of nature in its somber aspects that served as the most arresting characteristic of the sublime. In the eighteenth century, sublimity had thus become an attribute not only, or even primarily, of art: rather, the power and grandeur of nature became the privileged occasion for the experience.

This shift carries a twofold implication. First, it highlights the intensifying opposition between ‘man’ and ‘nature’ in the eighteenth century: while within the pre-modern world, nature is harmoniously aligned with the rest of creation so that each thing affirms and recognizes the other through similitudes and repetitions,⁴⁸ the dismantling of this world view demystified nature and made it into either raw material or object of scientific study. But it also made nature unpredictable, no longer bound by the homogeneous law of divine creation, and not yet entirely amenable to human laws. The fascination of the natural sublime can be described here as the expression of an unconscious fear of retribution⁴⁹ for the increasingly successful efforts of the human intellect and enterprise to master and instrumentalize nature, whose residual *anima* manifests as inhospitable animus. By ‘nature,’ however, we should understand anything that to the European mind appeared as raw material, inviting exploration and exploitation as well as awe and admiration: as Kant and his earlier British counterparts well knew, the abjection of nature—that which is ‘present at hand’—to human rationality is a necessary

⁴⁸ Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, for instance, describes this world-view as the essence of pre-modern epistemologies. See part 1, chapter 2 in particular.

⁴⁹ The most famous instance of such possible ‘retribution’ in the eighteenth century is the Lisbon earthquake (1755), which preceded Burke’s treatise on the beautiful and the sublime by a year. That this experience is the implicit backdrop for Kant’s account of the sublime in *Critique of Judgment* has been argued by Gene Ray. Ray also connects this eighteenth-century natural catastrophe with the man-made catastrophe of the twentieth century, the Holocaust. He argues that in each case, the resurgence of theoretical interest in the sublime is bound up with the actual encounter of the terror and unrepresentability of these cataclysmic events. While highly persuasive, this argument does not give full consideration to the fairly well-developed theorization of the sublime that was already in place in the first half of the eighteenth

condition of sublime pleasure. Hence a historicization of the British fascination with the natural sublime should properly include not only the otherness encountered by the British traveller in his or her tours of mountainous regions of Europe (as Marjorie Hope Nicolson suggests),⁵⁰ but also the intensely alienating and stimulating experience of confronting ‘New Worlds’ outside Europe preliminary to the bathetic business of colonization.⁵¹

Secondly, this shift from the Longinian rhetorical sublime⁵² to the Romantic natural sublime also has a predictive value for future trends in philosophy: the ease with which human artifacts change places with nature in this discourse prefigures the constructivist accounts of the natural world that would emerge towards the end of the century in Kant’s critical philosophy. The shift in the connotation of the word ‘aesthetic’ from its literal meaning as sensory experience to its specialized and now dominant meaning as the theory of art to some extent repeats the journey of the translation of a linguistic artifact into a natural phenomenon, and back into language in the course of a century. After its detour through ‘nature,’ the rhetorical sublime tends to acquire the stark givenness that till now could not be ascribed to art. The natural sublime is then the

century in British criticism. Only within the Kant-Adorno-Lyotard trajectory used by Ray does his theory have comprehensive explanatory force.

⁵⁰ Nicholson’s entire argument is far more complex than this, of course, and is acutely sensitive to the major intellectual shifts and upheavals that marked the arrival of modernity in Britain. For her, the sublime (or the infinite—Kant’s mathematical sublime) is the product of a synthesis of Neo-Platonism and modern science:

Scientifically minded Platonists, reading their ideas of infinity into a God of Plenitude, then reading them out again, transferred from God to Space to Nature conceptions of majesty, grandeur, vastness in which both admiration and awe were combined. The seventeenth century discovered “The Aesthetics of the Infinite.” (143)

⁵¹ Brunt’s dissertation “The Sublime and the ‘Civilized’ Subject: History, Painting, and Cook’s Second Voyage” discusses the impact of Cook’s colonial voyages on the depiction of the sublime in landscape painting. The most thorough historicization of the concept of the sublime can be found in Peter de Bolla’s *The Discourse of the Sublime*.

externalization of the enigma of Longinian rhetoric: the fact that human constructs can disarm the constitutive and constructive faculty of the mind promotes the recognition of art and artifice—and language itself—as the future site of metaphysical speculation. It is therefore not surprising that Kant’s conceptual constructivism was very quickly adapted into a linguistic constructivism in what is popularly called the Hamann-Herder-Humboldt axis of German philosophy,⁵³ leading to a robust theory of what might be characterized as the linguistic sublime of Romanticism. The Longinian rhetorical sublime thus reaches full circle within German Romanticism in a form that anticipates the philosophical biases in the late twentieth century.

The contradiction between the mystical and the mundane is therefore not the only duality temporarily resolved in the sublime: its history also shows a tendency to incorporate the natural and the artificial, unutterable reality and articulated world. The experience of the sublime is itself a product of the encounter of opposites, since it is the simultaneous presence of pleasure and pain in a single instance of aesthesis that distinguishes the sublime from mere pleasure. Hence when Burke theorized the sublime in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), he had to reconsider the entire notion of oppositions as mutually negating. Pleasure is not merely the absence of pain—its traditional opposite—but a richer and more independent concept that is purely positive (Burke 33-35). The pleasure we experience in the sublime must therefore be a different, more dialectical form of pleasure, since it arises as a consequence of the ending of pain. Relief from pain leads to a species of pleasure Burke decides to call ‘delight,’

⁵² However, it has been argued that Boileau, in his preface to *Traité du Sublime*, already turns the sublime into a psychological effect rather than a matter of rhetoric, to the extent that questions of language were seen as impediments to the sublime experience. See Monk 31-32; also see Axelsson 33-34.

⁵³ See Lafont’s *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, particularly chapters 1-3.

distinct from the autonomous experience of pleasure. Defined as it is through the absence of pain, delight is logically and formally ‘privation’ though experientially positive (36). While Burke’s distinction between ‘delight’ and ‘pleasure’—with ‘delight’ corresponding to the sublime and ‘pleasure’ to the beautiful—did not prove to be terminologically influential, the idea of the sublime as the simultaneity of opposites paradoxically held together by negation is significant for the Postmodern version of the sublime, which is founded on Postmodernism’s general tendency to rearticulate the positive as ethically inflected privation.⁵⁴

A similar conflict between pleasure and a related but qualitatively different experience pervades the writings of Wordsworth. His drive to market *Lyrical Ballads*, via the Preface, as primarily pleasurable is complicit with a utilitarian and commoditarian aesthetic that would ultimately call into question the legitimacy of poetry itself.⁵⁵ Hence even when Wordsworth’s theoretical statements continue to affirm pleasure, his poems explore alternative economies by thematizing the unpossessable, the incomprehensible and the inexpressible—in other words, the negative sublime, whose prime indicator is difficulty. His later career as a ‘difficult’ poet is already presaged in an iconic Romantic poem like the “The Solitary Reaper.” The pathos of the reaper’s song is the pathos of the listener’s own incomprehension, and the solitude of the reaper is also the solitude of the uncomprehending linguistic loneliness of the listener: “Will no one tell me what she sings?” The absence of meaning is accompanied by an excess of quantity because the

⁵⁴ The ethical content of the sublime has been disputed. Peter de Bolla has argued very strongly for the ethical import of sublimity, while other contemporary scholars, including James Kirwan, have pointed to its equally a-moral nature. Many eighteenth-century writers, including Kant in his pre-critical work on the subject, also considered the sublime to be unrelated to moral values.

⁵⁵ This argument, in its fundamental aspects, was advanced by Trilling in the essay “The Fate of Pleasure,” though here he sets up an opposition between Wordsworth’s and Keats’ use of the word ‘pleasure.’ It is in

‘Vale,’ however profound, is still unable to contain the vastness of the song, which appears to have “no ending.” Familiar metaphors of poetic song—nightingales and cuckoos—are transported to exotic locations—Arabia and the Hebrides—to emphasize the alienating experience of the sublime: for what we have here is without doubt the very same sublime on which Burke and Kant, among others, had expounded. The heroic sublimity of ancient wars and the “familiar matter” of everyday life, however, are both united, being rendered equally mysterious by the linguistic difficulty of the song. What the poem comprehends in the withholding of the poem is the strangeness of labor itself, of the ‘familiar’ spectacle of reaping that accompanies the stark unfamiliarity of the song and foregrounds the “motionless and still” listener. The deliberately self-contradictory tendency of Romanticism, most obvious in the concept of ‘Romantic irony,’⁵⁶ presents itself in Wordsworth’s egalitarian politics as the sublime of the everyday.⁵⁷ The difficulty engendered by linguistic resistance parallels the difficulty of physical labor. Both these difficulties are mediated by the song which as pure, unprocessed experience, can be

Keats, he argues, that pleasure is simultaneously an object of fascination and of repulsion. See Mercer for a refinement of Trilling’s argument.

⁵⁶ Friedrich Schlegel is generally credited with having turned irony into a cornerstone of the Romantic theoretical edifice. For an overview of Schlegel’s conception of irony as well as the modifications it underwent not only in the work of later thinkers but also Schlegel’s own writings, see Behler; also see Eichner for an account of Schlegel’s attitude towards poetry. Anne Mellor’s work is particularly significant in the British context, though my inclusion of Wordsworth within the purview of irony somewhat contradicts her reading of Wordsworth as “anxiously committed to the linear, apocalyptic plot of a secularized Christianity or ‘natural supernaturalism,’” and therefore “uncomfortable with the uncertainties and irresolutions of romantic irony” (142). But this very ‘anxiety’ and the resultant incertitude can, I imply, facilitate a species of irony in his work.

⁵⁷ Wordsworth’s poem is thus already prescient of what Terry Eagleton calls “the Marxist sublime” in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Wordsworth’s positioning of the female figure in between the incomprehensibility of nature and the transparency of the everyday has its parallels in German Romantic theory. For instance, Novalis comments in a footnote: “On the sphere of the women—the nursery—the kitchen—the garden—the cellar—the pantry—the bedroom—the living room—the guest room—the attic or the storage room” (Schulte-Sasse 382). Yet he also says:

Are [women] not similar to the indefinite in that they cannot be raised to the second power, but rather only be found through approximation? Are they not similar to the highest in that they are absolutely understandable and yet not understood, that they are absolutely indispensable, and yet

possessed without knowing, and can transcend its own evanescence by its sheer facticity and materiality that constitute an injunction to engage in labor: the listener has to ‘bear’ the song as he mounts the hill. The valleys of the everyday must now be as sublime as the hills of exaltation. While the poet climbs hills in search of sublime vertigo (a common practice in the eighteenth century), the poetic sublime in its turn anchors itself in the low-lying valley and the lowly woman (the sublime is traditionally masculine).⁵⁸

If scholars have frequently referred to Romanticism as the starting point of our current philosophical and aesthetic difficulties, it is not really because of the sublime—which had been built up substantially by the middle of the 18th century—but due to the Romantic reinvention of the concept of irony. Traditional irony presents a doubling of awareness or an excessive self-consciousness that belies any attempt at serious communication. The diminished authority of the speaker in ironic discourse can trivialize difficulty and mark it out as a symptom of ineptness rather than of design or ardor. Yet in Romanticism it receives a metaphysical upgradation that continues to have an impact on poetry and art. Irony, in its Romantic aspect, offers the possibility of counteracting the sublime instinct of surrender. Read in conjunction with the sublime, irony offers a possibility of encountering alterity under more controlled circumstances. The shadow of traditional irony always intrudes as a mode of self-awareness rather than of self-

are usually dispensed with. And are they not similar to higher beings in that they seem so childish, so ordinary, so idle, and so playful? (Schulte-Sasse 384)

⁵⁸ Kant, for instance, devotes an entire chapter of the pre-critical *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* to expound on the ‘nobility’ and ‘sublimity’ of the masculine as opposed to female ‘beauty,’ with a clear bias in favor for the masculine (chapter 3). See Shaw 23-26 for an overview of the gender bias in the sublime. Romanticism is more ambivalent in this hierarchy, as Lisa Roetzel points out in her study of Romantic attitudes towards the feminine. The Romantic privileging of chaos and nature can, as Roetzel argues, lead to a feminizing of philosophy. For example, Novalis declares that women “live in the true state of nature” (Schulte-Sasse 382). Similarly, Ritter comments: “The fact that it is woman who gives birth in nature indicates her superiority. Woman is actually the last limit of the earth, and man definitely stands a step below her” (Schulte-Sasse 392).

effacement: it is not irrationality, but a critique of rationality that is at work in this mode. The concept of indeterminacy that is closely related to difficulty in its contemporary forms can be understood, in its thematization and problematization of choice, in terms of Romantic irony and its stoic preservation of temporary and fragmented modes of selfhood as opposed to the ecstatic self-surrender typical of the sublime experience.

The work of Friedrich Schlegel is typical in its self-conscious difficulty. “You’re not really supposed to understand me, but I want very much for you to listen to me,” says Schlegel in 1800 (*Ideas* fragment 129; *Aesthetic Fragments* 253), the year in which the first version of Wordsworth’s Preface was written. In the same year he wrote the essay “On Incomprehensibility” (“Über die Unverständlichkeit”)⁵⁹ to defend the articles published in *Athenaeum* against the charge of incomprehensibility. The essay is as much a performance as a discussion of irony, which, for Schlegel, is the principal cause of the incomprehension: “A great part of the incomprehensibility of the *Athenaeum* is unquestionably due to the *irony* that to greater or lesser extent is to be found everywhere in it” (265; italics in the original). Quoting his own *Lyceum Fragments*, Schlegel describes irony (or Socratic irony) as

the only involuntary and yet completely deliberate dissimulation. [...] It originates in the union of *savoir* and *vivre* and scientific spirit, in the conjunction of perfectly instinctive and a perfectly conscious philosophy. It contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication. It is the freest of all licenses, for by its means one transcends oneself; and yet it is also the most lawful, for it is absolutely necessary. (265)

As “the form of paradox” (266) that articulates “the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication,” irony foregrounds the question of language as central to

⁵⁹ I am using the version of the essay published in *Lucinde and Other Fragments*.

incomprehensibility.⁶⁰ But the essay also insidiously advances a realistic moment of incomprehensibility through a rhetorical question: “[I]sn’t this entire, unending world constructed by the understanding out of incomprehensibility or chaos” (268)?⁶¹ Incomprehensibility, experienced as the difficulty of communication, can thus offer an experiential though not cognitive access to the elusive *ding an sich*—precisely the contentious truth claim of sublimity.

Irony filters the sublime through a radicalized version of Kant’s incomprehensible noumenon into a literary practice characterized by self-reflexivity and non-teleological dialecticality. The word ‘sublime’ in the nineteenth century continued to be used mostly in the pre-Kantian sense as a non-rational, if not irrational, self-transcendence and ecstasy rather than as the affirmation of self-complacent bourgeois rationality. It is the sublimated of the Kantian sublime—the self-reflexive about-turn in the face of an intransigent world—that produces the ironic mode. Irony constitutes the representation of the unrepresentable, as well as the representation of such a representation: the sublime representational failure and the inevitability of representation as art, philosophy, and as language itself, foregrounds the question of language—something that was of great interest to Schlegel,⁶² for instance—which forms the third prong of the particularly fertile nexus of proto-Postmodern thought that distinguishes the last decade of the eighteenth century. By offering a way of generating a literary version and experience of the sublime, Romantic irony moves poetry in the direction of self-reflexivity, difficulty, and what may

⁶⁰ The essay in fact begins with the question of whether “communication is actually possible” (259), and then raises (ironically, of course) a utopian vision of a “real language” (260) that can bypass the fallibility of words.

⁶¹ Romantic philosophers tended to interpret the noumenal world as chaos. For example, Novalis describes “an absolute sphere of existence, which is mere being—or chaos” (Schulte-Sasse 91).

⁶² See his extensive work on Sanskrit in *On the Indian Language, Literature, and Philosophy* included in *Aesthetic and Miscellaneous Works*.

be characterized as the linguistic sublime of Postmodern poetry. Irony is thus not just an item in the repertoire of tropes available to a poet, but is a limiting as well as defining condition for the enterprise of representation as such, so much so that it becomes the definitive trope for the literature of modernity.

Artifice and the Making of Difficulty

If poetic difficulty must be distinguished from difficulty as a general everyday experience and thereby taken up as a specifically literary thematic, the *poiesis* of poetry must be taken into account. In my foregoing discussion of the cryptogram and riddle as well as the sublime and ironic modes, I have gestured towards the specifically constructed quality of such difficulty. This construct may or may not find analogues in the everyday encounters with difficulties that are experienced as not found but given. In both Steiner and Wilkinson, there is a strong interest in modes of difficulty that cannot be deliberately made. But if poetry is not to be overwhelmed by theoretical superstructures, only as practice can difficulty be incorporated into the study of poetry. And it is important at the very outset not to be too hasty in moving from problems of craft to those of *technê* as Heidegger understood the term—as a generalized mode of discovering knowledge. In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger explicitly disengages *technê* from the idea of making: “*Technê*, as knowledge experienced in the Greek manner, is a bringing forth of beings in that it *brings forth* what is present as such *out of* concealment and specifically *into* the unconcealment of its appearance; *technê* never signifies the action of making” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 184). Important as Heidegger’s engagement with poetry is for twentieth-

century poets and their readers, his distrust of the act of making in which the presence of the medium is subordinated to its *telos* as something other than itself renders his account of poetry inadequately equipped to deal with the modes of potentially non-violent transformations of art. The humbler term ‘artifice’ would in fact be more appropriate for the time being, even though it can never be totally disengaged from Heidegger’s notion of it as an essentially cognitive process. This issue will be discussed in some detail in Chapter 5.

The decline of artificiality as a legitimate attribute of poetry has been identified as a late-eighteenth-century phenomenon. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century attempts to defend poetry often address an audience that is indifferent or hostile to poetry’s artifice, or to the wings of Daedalus that keep poetry aloft (as Philip Sidney puts it in his apology for poetry), that is finally the most distinctive aspect of the art. However, the demand that poetry exhibit some form of emotional authenticity is quite different from the demand that it be a useful social product: the apologies for poetry that were produced in the 16th and 17th century were responding, after all, to Puritan critiques of art as corrupting influences. It is the pre-Enlightenment openness to artifice that allows the Elizabethan translator and court wit John Harington quite seriously to include lack of artificiality in a list of poetic defects.⁶³ The ‘commonsensical’ eighteenth century marks a change in art’s confirmed entrenchment in the realm of artifice. From this point onwards, art has continued to justify its naturalness, not just through repeated

⁶³ Similarly, consider this statement from a 1823 review of Thomas Lovell Beddoes’ work: “The management of the plot is very inartificial and unskillful, as might be expected from so young a writer, and the dialogue ... is nearly all entirely inappropriate” (qtd. in Ashbery *Other Traditions* 35). This suggests that even in the early nineteenth century, artificiality was a desirable quality in the artist. The poetry of Byron stands for the nineteenth-century reaction against a poetry of sincerity and naturalism, and continues 18th-century town-poetry modes. The argument that I present thus traces only one, though a dominant, trajectory.

affirmations of its exterior referentiality, but also through the ‘naturalness’ of its processes and techniques. Thus, for instance, in the Romantic sublime and irony, difficulty is affiliated with large metaphysical questions rather than the exigencies of craft.

Even poetic craft, which can arbitrarily generate complexities out of sheer playfulness, is thus subject to social regulation. Though the word has always remained part of the analytical vocabulary of the art critic, it constantly has to face the charges of duplicity and inauthenticity to which art has always been subjected. And it is not mimetic art alone that has to suffer this discomfiture. In some ways, difficult art’s reluctance to communicate could be construed as the worst form of insincerity, and the poets I shall speak of have devised various ways to portray difficulty as in fact central to a poetics of sincerity. Each poet is fully aware of the weight of history that presses upon the seemingly trivial pursuit of linguistic cryptology: difficulty is finally a context for the renegotiation of both mental and social spaces, and the stakes might indeed be very high.

CHAPTER 2

SELF, ETHICS, AND DIFFICULTY IN JOHN ASHBERY

Introduction

Ashbery's poems have been praised from radically opposite standpoints. Their human appeal and the pervasive impression they give of imperfect beauty and innocent bewilderment have made it easy for scholars and poets who value the Romantic tradition to enlist him as an important post-Romantic practitioner of the art, and a key spokesman for the human condition of our times.¹ Future-oriented scholars like Marjorie Perloff, on the other hand, pointing to the pervasive difficulty of his work and his clear refusal to be a 'man speaking to men,' have denied that his work is in any significant sense post-Romantic, and celebrate instead its avant-garde poetics of radical indeterminacy and openness.² The combination of difficulty and humanist appeal has made Ashbery, oxymoronic enough, the most popular difficult poet of his generation. His poems draw upon the energies of both the poles of poetic expression: alienating difficulty, and reassuring organicity. This combination is fraught with contradictions that lie at the heart

¹ It was Harold Bloom who first inducted Ashbery into the post-Romantic canon, via Stevens, Whitman and Emerson (see his early essay "The Charity of Hard Moments" (1973) and his introduction to *John Ashbery*). Helen Vendler similarly argues that Ashbery "comes from Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, Stevens, Eliot; his poems are about love, or time, or age" (Vendler 185). (In a recent interview with Christopher Hennessey, Ashbery remarks that he considers Vendler and Bloom to be two of his most "sensitive" critics; see Hennessey 40.) A more recent—and more critical—set of essays that emphasize Ashbery's links to Romanticism can be found in *Poetry and the Sense of Panic*, edited by Lionel Kelley. Ashbery has himself insisted that "[A]ll my stuff is romantic poetry, rather than metaphysical or surrealist" ("Craft Interview" 129).

² See Perloff's chapter on Ashbery in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (248-87), and some of her more recent articles on Ashbery's later work, including the essay "Normalizing John Ashbery" in *Jacket 2*. Perloff's emphasis on the difficult, avant-garde Ashbery has resulted in a studied misrecognition of the Romantic elements in his work: a particularly dangerous move since avant-garde poetics of difficulty owe much to British and Continental Romanticism.

of Ashbery's poetic enterprise, and supply the profiles and patterns of its circulatory ebb and flow. Anti-humanist technique doesn't deter humanist listening posts from functioning with impunity in this typically postmodern work.³

Difficulty in art indexes the poverty as well as the richness of human representation. Its unremitting juxtaposition of the essentially incommensurate subject and object creates varying contexts for the effort of interpretation through the interplay of opacity and transparency. The experience of a world that is responsive to human willing (read desire) through labor rather than as a matter of course is what finds a mirror in difficulty. Ashbery's poems prominently highlight and detail the labor, but they also consciously retain the memory of prelapsarian possibilities through contrastive textual referencing. For radicalized difficulty, the human is not a transhistorically valid model, and it would be skeptical in principle about any "one big theory to explain the universe" (as he says in "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" 81) that might sponsor it; the problem with the gratuitously given model of humanity is that even in parts it drags the grand narrative of which it is a product right into the structure and conduct of the poem. The

³ The doubleness of Ashbery's poetic output and appeal has been the subject of much critical curiosity. In "Ashbery and Language Poetry," Peter Nicholls observes that Ashbery's importance is partly due to his simultaneous popularity among the traditionalists—represented by figures like Bloom and Vendler—and the avant-gardists—particularly the Language poets. "[W]ith the partial exception of Wallace Stevens," Nicholls writes, Ashbery "is the one recent poet to be admired on both sides of the poetry divide" (156). Predictably enough, Ashbery's work has been often used to question the integrity and relevance of this divide. For instance, Nick Lolordo's 2001 essay "Charting the Flow: Positioning John Ashbery" observes that Ashbery scholarship has built up two distinct Ashberys, one of whom participates in the tradition that absorbs Romanticism and High Modernism of the Eliotic variety, and the other is an Ashbery of radically discontinuous avant-gardism (750). Lolordo's reading of *Flow Chart*, however, leads him to conclude that Ashbery might be somewhere on the edge, exploring the spaces beyond Modernism while refusing to let go of the Modernist moorings from which he repeatedly starts out. For James Longenbach, Ashbery's virtue lies precisely in his refusal "to choose sides in the debates that preoccupied so many American poets after modernism" (105). But for many critics, Ashbery does choose, and in choosing, errs grievously. Jerome McGann contends that Ashbery's poetry from 1973 onwards abandons its own 'oppositional' political potentialities in favor of distinctly middle-class and private interests ("Contemporary Poetry, Alternate Routes" 158). Ashbery himself professes satisfaction over the state of affairs: "Because my poetry is so heterogeneous, I suppose it's not surprising that different kinds of readers find there's something that

coexistence of these contradictory elements creates a crisis of confidence for the wary reader, because the poem seems uncertain about whether to let the reader take home anything that might relieve boredom, sustain hope, highlight danger, or otherwise provoke reflection, or else radically to promote skepticism about the possibility of there being valid take home objects at all: as the opposing critical camps make clear, the poems do both.

In his Norton lectures published under the title *Other Traditions*, Ashbery describes his own poetry as oscillating between the modes represented by John Clare and Thomas Lovell Beddoes. If Clare specializes in a literal reality that needs no support from claims of transcendental relevance, Beddoes takes reality as “literary” rather than literal (34): “The imagery is precious, enamelled; the message is either horrific or unconvincingly transcendental” (35). His own poetry, Ashbery says, swings between “the poles of Clare’s lumpy poetry of mud and muck and Beddoes’ perfumed and poisonous artifice” (35). A poetry invested with both the authenticity of the literal and the exoticism of the artificial has been a pervasive twentieth-century ideal: even if the gardens are imaginary, the toads must be real. Ashbery’s use of the term ‘artifice’ is radically different from the way it is used in a formalist text like *Poetic Artifice*, in which ‘artifice’ is an unqualified good. When Ashbery uses it in this context, the word carries the full force of its negative history of deceit and duplicity, of the imitation masquerading as the real.⁴ The issue is not so much of craft but of dishonest or illegitimate mimesis that resonates with the late-Romantic fascination with opiates and the “artificial paradises” that they create. For it is

attracts them. And indeed that’s what I hoped would happen. It may not be the reason I write the way I do; on the other hand it might just be” (Hennessy 44).

Baudelaire's *Les Paradis Artificiels* and the jewelled fantasies of Stevens' early poetry that underwrite Ashbery's sense of artifice: what is at stake is the permissible range of the imagination's tendency to replace reality. Veronica Forrest-Thomson's point that in Ashbery, technique itself is ironized—or in her words, that “[t]echnique is made part of a technique to transcend technique” (*Poetic Artifice* 157)—is highly pertinent here. Technique is the strongest index of a poetic “seriousness” that is committed to a poetic truthfulness not beholden to objective accounts of truth. The desire to overcome technique implies not just an attenuated form of dandyism, but the need to slip into an altogether more authentic and consensual form of sincerity indicated by Ashbery's carefully-preserved syntax.

This attempt to access the real through the unreal might possibly be redescribed in terms of the ‘dialecticality’ that is, as I shall argue in the following chapter, important for Prynne's poetry. But Prynne has a declared indifference to establishing any direct relationship with the reader whereas Ashbery—despite his deep suspicion of a singular, shared reality—is deeply invested in communication, and communication with a large, rather than a small, audience. While speaking of his notoriously difficult *The Tennis Court Oath*, Ashbery remarks: “I suppose if the majority of readers don't get anything out of a poem then it is ineffective [...]. If this happens, then I have undoubtedly failed” (Bloom and Losada 95). The elitism of difficult poetry that more recent theorists of difficulty, including Diepeveen and Christie,⁵ are eager to point out and condemn—if only

⁴ This is indeed a major problem for Romantic poets, and the need to reconcile the artificiality of the work of art with the general Romantic valorization of living and “organic form” pervades Romanticism. See Black 118-123 for a recent discussion of the concept of organic form in Romanticism.

⁵ See chapter 1 pp. 15-16 for my thoughts on Diepeveen's work on difficulty. In “A Recent History of Difficult Poetry,” William Christie remarks:

There can be little doubt that in the work of the French Romantics, the formal *difficulty* of poetry becomes an unashamed, indeed a provocative *obfuscation*. Nor can it be doubted that in the

discreetly—is a real threat to the poetic conscience as well: Ashbery’s measurement of his success in terms of the number of readers who profited from his poem suggests as much. The unethicity of difficulty is a constant irritant in Ashbery’s work, so that both the fictive and the real are ultimately subordinated to a principle of honest communication. The result is that the poetry is extremely vulnerable to the ideology of the human, and hostage to a historically specific interpretation of the humanity as deserving, even dependent upon, ease and instantaneous gratification of desire. The entire framework of labor and deferred possession that characterizes difficulty will appear needlessly violent to such versions of humanity. This, then, constitutes the chief paradox of Ashbery’s poetry: while some of his more accessible poems, such as “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” explicitly thematize the impossibility of circumscribed selfhood and the intransigence of experience, most of his works—including *The Tennis Court Oath*—constantly and penitentially enact the suffering that difficulty might mean to a selfhood that is experienced as irreducibly given and always prior to construction and interpretation. The exclusion implicit in difficulty is therefore perforated by an instinctive revulsion against such typically Modernist tactics, and a corresponding sympathy for the unsuspecting reader who is subjected to needless aggression. Ashbery’s poetry can ultimately neither accept nor reject the essentialism embedded in the concept of the human, and therefore finds it impossible completely to give in to the ‘inhumanity’ and interiority of an alienating poetic language.⁶

derogation of the masses by subsequent, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers, the Romantic artist’s alienated predicament became translated by paranoia and melancholia into a form of existentialism, his rejection of the city and its crowds into demophobia: “Hell is other people.” (557)

⁶ Mutlu Konuk Blasing’s description of the inhumanity of language is relevant in this context. She speaks of the “nothingness” of the category of the “human” that is experienced through poetry. The linguistically constituted self vividly experiences its mediation through an “inhuman” linguistic code within poetry: “The

Though some of the discussion that follows will appear to be critical of Ashbery, my criticism is not related to the accusation of a lack of political consciousness ascribed to Ashbery by scholars like Jerome McGann (627-28). The relationship between poetry and efficacious social critique is tenuous at best. Theodor Adorno's description of the relationship between lyric poetry and society can help to avoid setting up simplistic parallelisms:

In every lyric poem the historical relation of subject to object, of individual to society within the realm of subjective spirit thrown back on its own resources—this historical relation must have been precipitated in the poem. This precipitation will be more perfect, the more the poem eschews the relation of self to society as an explicit theme and the more it allows this relation to crystallize involuntarily from within the poem. [...] Lyric poetry is not to be deduced from society; its social content is precisely its spontaneity, which does not follow from the conditions of the moment. ("Lyric Poetry and Society 28-29)

Explicit political stances (critique of capitalism, laments over Iraq) therefore do not define the social value of the lyric. (Hence Mohanty and Monroe's defense of Ashbery's work as intentionally political is not entirely indispensable, even though they do initiate the necessary task of exploring Ashbery's social and political commitments.⁷) My narrative does not therefore parallel the story of decline that has been mapped out by McGann, where Ashbery's best and most innovative work happens in the sixties and seventies (McGann 627), followed by a period, extending to the present, in which the work compromises itself by becoming less 'difficult.' Rather, I suggest that throughout his poetic career, including its most radically experimental phases, Ashbery has adhered to

subject of poetry, the 'I,' is 'human' only insofar as she is able to maintain and communicate an intimacy with the inhuman linguistic code by which she became 'human.' This is why the subject in language is not 'human' in any ordinary sense of the term, and we need to think poetry outside humanism" (9). But after this pronouncement, Blasing almost immediately makes a number of moves derived from psychoanalysis that seem as regrettably restrictive and essentialist to me as the version of humanism she repudiates.

⁷ For instance, in their analysis of Ashbery's "A Wave," Mohanty and Monroe comment: "As the use of the word "negotiations" suggests, as well as the power of the images of invading and smashing the institutions

humanistic values that constantly call into question the poet's right to be difficult.

Humanism, Anti-Humanism, and Postmodern Difficulty

Part of the historical specificity of Postmodern difficulty consists in its affinity for the twentieth-century reaction against humanism. The Modernist strand of the anti-humanist impulse rebels against what is perceived as weakness, sentimentalism, inability to accept one's fate, and of course idealistic notions of identity. The dominant influence is certainly Nietzsche, particularly for the 'heroic' mode of anti-humanism advocated by T.E. Hulme,⁸ though modified versions that prioritize the issues of essentialism and idealism have more or less downplayed the tragic-heroic and stoical aspects of anti-humanism. Anti-humanism's move against idealism has at least two consequences: one is that the human cannot be realized as a struggle to achieve a pre-ordained essence, since they are always sponsored by reigning ideologies and are usually legislated into being as sets of restrictions and taboos, either positively or negatively defined. Christ serves as the ideal to which all Christians should aspire, for example, so actual human beings end up feeling guilty about sex, never measuring up to Christ's self-abnegating charity, and always guilty of not being a martyr. For Hulme, belief in the infinite perfectability of man reduced human beings to being always not yet grown up, and this infantilization of the individual is for him typical of Romanticism. The notion of original sin on the other hand enabled human beings to work with and within their limitations in a mature, adult way. Modernist abstraction, which represents this maturity by proclaiming human

of polite society, poetry is here conceived as one discursive mode among others actively engaged in social struggle" (46).

⁸ See Avery for a very useful discussion of T.E. Hulme's anti-humanism.

mastery over the given, spills into the anti-Romantic stances of those Modernists who had direct links with Hulme such as T.S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, and D.H. Lawrence. Hulme's 'classicist' variety of anti-humanism could not remain ideologically viable for long in a century haunted by the proliferation of totalitarian regimes in the West; Foucault's Nietzschean reinterpretation of the human as a function of power and similar mechanistic models are in this sense a continuation of this fundamentally compromised philosophical tradition. When aligned with such a notion of anti-humanism, difficulty becomes susceptible to what Diepeveen calls Modernism's "machismo" through association with an ethic of virility.⁹

The second outcome of the move against idealism is the possibility of the human being rendered radically open. On the one hand, this would imply a non-teleological model in which the category of the human includes and describes all members of the species; there is no narrative of progress to generate gradations. Here there are no legislations to indicate limits or proscriptions: the human is as human finds it. Such a negatively defined and anarchic mode of human existence would seem to offer relief from ideological supervision, had it not been for the fact that the human subject credited with such freedom enters the arena as an always-already bourgeois subject. Freedom itself as defined and experienced in Western democracies (for instance) is historical, and declarations of freedom themselves have ineradicable ideological content. This paradox forms the basis of irony in postmodern art and poetry. The evasion of 'normal consciousness' as such through the exploration of diminished, hallucinatory, clinically insane (schizophrenia is particularly popular) and oneiric states of mind is a last-ditch—

⁹ For a discussion of the relationship between Modernist difficulty, vigour and pleasure, see Diepeveen, chapter 4.

but self-defeating—effort to evade ideological determination. This artificial sense of the human might be opposed to its artifactual counterpart favored by much of Deconstruction and late Marxism, which imagine the self as being constructed by the discourses that locate it, and at the same time constructing itself through the qualified freedoms permitted by such locations. Difficulty in this context can stand for modes of experience that do not intend a pre-determined human subject, so that humanity can be negotiated through and within the negative spaces created through these opacities.

Ashbery's famous description of his use of the personal pronoun indicates his interest in delocalized and displaced modes of consciousness that are linked to both the Surrealist and Post-Structuralist anti-essentialist modes:

The personal pronouns in my work very often seem to be like variables in an equation. "You" can be myself or it can be another person. . . and my point is also that it doesn't matter very much, that we are somehow all aspects of consciousness giving rise to the poem and the fact of addressing someone, myself or someone else, is what's the important thing at this particular moment rather than a particular person involved. (Bloom and Losada 123-24)

This Structuralist description belies the fact that despite pervasive irony, the 'I's and the 'you's in Ashbery are seldom without identifiable content. Ashbery's humanism essentially recuperates for Postmodernism a vision of the human as vulnerable, fallible, and disempowered but relatively at home with the inscrutable through an intuitive trust in the systems that dominate it. This recuperation of an insufficiently ironized Christian subject makes Ashbery's difficulties, as I have suggested, unsure of their own ethical import, since the ethics of difficulty in its Modernist versions is inextricable from a general Nietzschean celebration of a vigorous and highly suspect manliness. But this sometimes amounts to a violence upon the creative imagination, which must not be subordinated to the given if it is to perform genuine acts of giving.

The Difficulties of Self-Portraiture in Convex Mirrors

The appearance of the poem “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” in the 1975 collection with the same title became a Rosetta Stone moment for those as yet uninitiated into Ashbery’s dreamlike verbal enigmas (the poem had been published separately in the journal *Poetry* in 1974).¹⁰ Parmigianino’s painting, from which the poem borrows its title, finally offered a concrete referential fulcrum to which Ashbery’s imaginative wanderings could be attached. This supposedly revelatory moment for Ashbery’s poetry—for some, like McGann, it is also the moment of Ashbery’s decline into a poetry of accommodation¹¹—is particularly significant as a musing on the depth model of subjectivity and difficulty: the tensions between interiority and surface is worked out in this poem as a conflict between the verbal and the visual.¹² “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” foregrounds the limitations and the possibilities of mirrors and representations. Ekphrastically invoking Parmigianino’s Mannerist painting, Ashbery creates an implicit allegory of poetic difficulty through his explication of the paradoxes of verisimilitude. Though Ashbery worked for a long time as an art critic, he has declared his discomfort with the genre of ekphrasis in interviews. For instance, he tells Mark Ford in reply to a question about “Self-Portrait”: “I’m still not sure I like the genre it seems to occupy—that of a poem about a work of art. I can’t think of any examples of this genre I really

¹⁰ Thus, for instance, a contemporary review of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* declares that the title poem shows Ashbery at his best while at the same time concluding that much of Ashbery’s work, even in the volume *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, is “just plain bad” (Miklitsch 119).

¹¹ See McGann’s “Contemporary Poetry, Alternate Routes” 627-28.

¹² For readings of Ashbery’s relationship with the visual arts, see, among others, Leslie Wolf’s “The Brushstroke’s Integrity: The Poetry of John Ashbery and the Art of Painting”; Fred Moramarco’s “John Ashbery and Frank O’Hara: The Painterly Poets”; and Dubois 30-56. Also see Gilbert’s “Ludic

like. Maybe Auden’s ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’” (Ashbery and Ford 57). Indeed, even within the poem he alludes more than once to the violence that art objects are subjected to in the hands of the art-critical industry. Ekphrasis might, if only obliquely, participate in that exploitation: the shadow of this possible guilt intensifies the pathos of the ekphrastic act. But the poem’s attempt to evade exploitation often turns it against language itself, which, as I shall show, is often deemed by the poem to be inferior to the present reality of visual art.

Mirrors have been inevitably associated with visual exactitude. Whatever its truth value, the controversial Hockney-Falco hypothesis—which argues that 15th-century Flemish masters, particularly Jan van Eyck, achieved their high degree of realist detail by using concave mirrors to project images of their subjects directly on to the canvas—indicates the extent to which mirrors and realism are interconnected in the art-critical imagination.¹³ It was Leonardo da Vinci who explicitly equated for the first time, in the early 1490s, the painted picture with the image produced by a mirror, thereby envoicing a “concept latent in earlier texts, which was to become the dominant metaphor in the written discourse on painting from the sixteenth century onwards” (Yiu 202). The convex mirror was a particularly popular trope for the act of painting as well as for luxury. Thus the convex mirror in van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Wedding* not only multiplies the room’s luxury in its own luminous and expensive surfaces, but also contains a miniature

Eloquence”; Steven Paul Miller; and Sweet. Shoptaw’s book-length study is, as usual, also an extremely important resource for this aspect of Ashbery’s work.

¹³ See David Hockney’s *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters*, particularly 71-74. This theory has been spiritedly refuted: see, for instance, Yiu, Stork, and Schechner. Van Eyck’s work in particular has been important for understanding Renaissance realism, and Jenny Graham, in *Inventing van Eyck: The Remaking of an Artist for the Modern Age*, has made a convincing argument for considering van Eyck’s realism as highly influential for 19th-century debates on realism.

image of the painter and other witnesses¹⁴ of the supposed wedding:¹⁵ the inclusivity of the convex mirror, which can pack in much more detail than a flat mirror, is fully exploited here.

The mirror is also a trope for the act of painting itself and not merely of self-portraiture: indeed, several scholars have argued that van Eyck achieved his highly detailed representations by painting reflections in a convex mirror and correcting the distortions.¹⁶ Predecessors of van Eyck like Robert Campin had already used the convex mirror as a motif in many of their works (Nash 433). Also significant are the representations of St. Luke painting the Virgin produced between 1470 and 1520 in the Netherlands that might have followed a version by Robert Campin: such paintings always show, according to Yvonne Yiu, a large convex mirror placed very close to the Saint, who is depicted in the act of painting the Virgin.¹⁷ Yiu argues that here the convex mirror

is not used as a technical aid by St. Luke who pays no heed to it. Rather than being an artists' tool, the mirror appears to belong to the furnishings of the well-appointed interior in which St. Luke has temporarily set up his easel. However, the mirror image invariably shows the artist at work. By reflecting precisely the act of painting, the formal analogy between the image-bearing surface of the mirror and that of the panel is clearly flagged as being self-referential, a visual metaphor explicating the view that a painting is like a mirror. ("The Mirror" 202)

By the time Parmigianino paints his self-portrait, however, the convex mirror moves

¹⁴ According to Ludwig Baldass, "In the round mirror hanging on the wall [...] the backs of the young couple are reflected, as well as the remaining half of the room in front of them. Through the door, which must be imagined as being in the place of the spectator, two men are entering, and they, too, are clearly visible in the convex mirror." They are obviously Jan van Eyck and the witnesses to the marriage. (Baldass 74).

¹⁵ The idea that it was a wedding portrait was first advanced by Erwin Panofsky in his celebrated 1934 article. But the supposition has been strongly criticized in recent years. See "The Reality of Symbols: The Question of Disguised Symbolism in Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*" by Jan Baptist Bedaux for an overview of literature to date as well as an alternative explanation.

¹⁶ See Pendergrast 136. Pendergrast also argues that there is "indirect evidence" that a number of minor 15th-century landscapes and interiors were produced using convex mirrors (137).

¹⁷ In "Der Spiegel: Werkzeug des Künstlers oder Metapher der Malerei?" Yiu explores this topic in greater detail and refers to paintings by Derek Baegert, Colijn de Coter, Meister des hl. Blutes, Jan de Beer and

from the periphery of the painting to an obtrusive centrality that presents not only realistic detail—for which it had apparently been used for at least a century—but also to produce a parallel realism of harmonious distortion.

Ashbery's understanding of the optics of the convex mirror is somewhat insufficient, and so he overestimates its ability to distort. He seems to think, for instance, that the hand in the foreground of the painting is the artist's right hand, the hand he used to paint the self-portrait:

As Parmigianino did it, the right hand
Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer (68)¹⁸

But the hand in the painting is in fact the left hand, the right being busy painting. The mirror would show the left hand as the right, as the painting too does, so the hand is the right hand of the mirror image. While Ashbery seems to be aware of the lateral inversion produced by convex mirrors when he speaks of how the image is projected at “a 180-degree angle” (68) and of forms being “reversed in the accumulating mirror” (73), he fails to take notice of it again when he remarks that the window is to the right of the sitter. The poem speaks of “that/ Sliver of window or mirror on the right” (70); this mirror/window is in fact located on Parmigianino's left-hand side. This error (if error it is, for it is possible that Ashbery didn't want to account for lateral inversion so that he could grant primacy to the distortions, preferring ‘seeming’ to ‘being’)¹⁹ in Ashbery's analysis of the painting is not being cited in order to score pedantic points, though this is

others, all of whom employ the motif of the convex mirror in their versions of *St. Luke Painting the Virgin* (*Lukas malt die Madonna*).

¹⁸ I have consistently used the 1975 edition of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* in this text.

¹⁹ Towards the end of the poem, however, Parmigianino's hand is described as being held out in a gesture of greeting (82); it would be hard to describe the outstretched hand as anything but the right hand. Either the entire poem is based on a deliberate acceptance of the mirror's distortions as real—though it is the mirror's heightened ‘naturalism’ that the poem seems to quarrel with most of the time—or Ashbery is genuinely mistaken.

probably the only Ashbery poem that can even be subjected to such scrutiny. Neither are they in any way a continuation of the aesthetic of error with which a number of his younger contemporaries have experimented (I discuss this thematic in chapter 5). For this poetry, the details do not matter, though of course, they would for realist—even Mannerist—art. Distortion (and error) are inevitable: if not of one sort, then another, the poem suggests, rendering the ‘work’ of interpretation appear futile and even ridiculous for both author and reader. Perhaps one needn’t even try to be accurate: in fact, inaccuracy might very well provide access to higher-order accuracies (an issue that I will return to in chapter 5).

In trying to be true to what he saw in the mirror, Parmigianino produced accurate distortions. Being able to sit for one’s own portrait involves turning oneself into an object, and the mirror and its reflection become the subject of the self-portrait. The poem sees in this artistic act a demonstration of virtuosity as well as a commitment to accuracy that produces the reality of what mirrors do. If Parmigianino had painted his reflection in a flat mirror, it wouldn’t have been possible to show the mirror, because *trompe l’oeil* would have demanded the effacement of the mirror. The satisfaction of truthfulness to optical reality and to the distorting reality of the medium becomes an aesthetic value here. The measure of this value is partially the circularity of the painting’s procedures: its turning into itself creates a self-sufficient whole, a temporary moment of self-sufficiency within a larger chaos. The poem’s emphasis on the spherical is a feature that John Shoptaw, Ashbery’s most perceptive critic,²⁰ connects with the mannerist problematic:

Virtually all the figuration in Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait” derives from the mannerist

²⁰ Ashbery has, however, refuted some of Shoptaw’s readings (Hennessy 40).

tension between the central head and the surrounding hand. All curved, turning, circular, or enveloping figures in “Self-Portrait” are concentric, though our perspective is sometimes central and at other times peripheral. (*On the Outside* 179)

The circularity of the self-portrait is translated into the circumference of the eye/I of the artist:

I see in this only the chaos
Of your round mirror which organizes everything
Around the polestar of your eyes which are empty,
Know nothing, dream but reveal nothing. (71)²¹

The eyes that see and withhold without possessing points to an aesthetic of surface that makes the primal tension of the poem one between not just the center and periphery—as Shoptaw has it—but also between the visual and the verbal. The difficult and the transparent are held in an exacting balance through an art that celebrates ‘surface’: “But your eyes proclaim / That everything is surface. The surface is what’s there / And nothing can exist, except what’s there” (70).²² Being there is to be there as “visible core,” so that surfaces are never “superficial.” The core of anything is not a heart hidden deep inside the object itself, but lies entirely in its performance as visible surface. This

²¹ Here Ashbery alludes to Donne’s famous image in *The Canonization*, in which the whole world is compacted within the eyes of the beloved just as the convex mirror—which was the earliest glass mirror manufactured in the West (Anderson 3)—accumulates detail:

Who did the whole world’s soul extract, and drove
Into the glasses of your eyes
(So made such mirrors, and such spies,
That they did all to you epitomize). (Donne 238)

In fact, it is possible to argue with Miranda Anderson that the medieval and early modern tendency to equate books and mirrors arises from the analogy of the convex mirror:

The continuing concept and belief that knowledge could be encapsulated and encompassed in a book is therefore evident in the continuing use of mirror-titles and relates to the particular qualities of the convex glass, since (to adopt another commonplace analogy) like an eye it compresses what it reflects in a reduced but multidirectional form. (“Early Modern Mirrors” 113)

²² There is a possible reference here to the last line of Wallace Stevens’ “The Snow Man.”

valorization of the visible promotes appearance as essence.²³ The enigmatic and the encrypted become particularly vexing when confronted as surface phenomena: the riddle and its solution can no longer be differentiated. This is one of the most typically ‘postmodern’ qualities of Ashbery’s difficulty, which characteristically replaces doubling with a unification of perspectives along the horizontal plane. Depth is merely an illusion, but the surface is fact.

The poem cites secondary sources, quotes Vasari several times, and is mindful of its own linguistic constructedness. In terms of its commitment to ‘facts,’ this is perhaps the one Ashbery poem that tries hard to be true to its referents. The painting appears in the poem through descriptions and interpretations: through the words of the poem as well as through the words of critics and commentators. And yet, words are somehow and in general not adequate—indeed, the poem takes that for granted:

And just as there are no words for the surface, that is,
No words to say what it really is, that it is not
Superficial but a visible core, then there is
No way out of the problem of pathos vs. experience. (70)

Words, in other words, make surface superficial, and promote the plumbing of depth, the extraction of essence and meaning. Where the visible is fact, words are fiction,

²³ In an excellent essay on literary ekphrasis, Valentine Cunningham suggests—overturning Lessing’s privileging of the verbal arts in the process—that ekphrasis is motivated by the effort to appropriate for language the ‘thingness’ of the made object:

Writing is always tormented by the question of real presence, by challenges to knowability, by the problematics of truth and validity, the difficulty of being sure about what it might be pointing to outside of itself, by its deictic claims and desires, by what its grammar of pointing, its *this* and *that* and *there* might be indicating, by what if anything is actually made present to the reader when the text says, with Jesus at the Last Supper and the priest at the eucharistic table, *Hoc est . . . , this is . . .* The ekphrastic encounter seeks, I think, to resolve this ancient and continuing doubting by pointing at an allegedly touchable, fingerable, *thisness*. It lays claim to the absolute *thereness* of an aesthetic object, the thereness writing is (rightly) so doubtful about, and seeks to corral that evident (or claimed) empirical, real, truthfulness for itself and its own doings. It wants the real presence of the made object to rub off, as it were, on its own proceedings. (61)

To the extent that the poem seems to privilege appearance, it repeats Cunningham’s account of the relationship between the visual and the verbal.

interpretation, and to that extent, inauthentic. It is through the painted eyes that the ‘soul’ of the sitter would have “sw[um] out” had not the painter’s look intercepted the picture (68). The reaction it provoked among its contemporary first audience is wordless, the poem notes, quoting Vasari: “Pope Clement and his court were ‘stupefied’ / By it, according to Vasari, and promised a commission / That never materialized” (69). The Papal ensemble is rendered incapable of any sensual response: their words, when they do appear, do not create anything concrete.

What the painting itself ‘says’ is the fact of posing, of having to hold a position still for the painting to happen:

The soul has to stay where it is,
Even though restless, hearing raindrops at the pane,
The sighing of autumn leaves thrashed by the wind,
Longing to be free, outside, but it must stay
Posing in this place. It must move
As little as possible. This is what the portrait says. (69)

This saying is of course, metaphorical, even metaphysical. It is a secondary affect produced by the visual apprehension of the gaze of the sitter within the portrait. The gaze itself does not require the pain of interpretation: the soul exists only within the temporal space of our own attention. This is what the portrait ‘says,’ but by this time, saying itself has become so debased that the metaphor used now comes from the abstract and ‘pure’ art of music, wordless:

But there is in that gaze a combination
Of tenderness, amusement and regret, so powerful
In its restraint that one cannot look for long.
The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts,
Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,
Has no secret, is small, and it fits
Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention.
That is the tune but there are no words.
The words are only speculation

(From the Latin *speculum*, mirror):
They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music. (69)

Seeking is all words can do, finding is beyond them: the Latin derivation of 'speculation' does admit to some finding, but only after metaphorical reconfiguration as mirror, and therefore only insofar as they permit looking. This is a poem very obviously in love with visible objects and beings—all apparently fully and completely available at hand, just as the relationship between the words 'speculation' and 'mirror' is made instantaneously available to the reader. Its difficulty must come from what is seen when looking happens, as I shall soon show.

If it is what is naturally or artistically given that is disclosed in perspicuity, it is not necessarily the outcome of discreteness of choice or certainty of result. The semantics of gestures, whether musical or visual, can transcend the strict dualisms of truth tables, and dwell in a perpetuity of ambiguity and uncertainty that offers no hope of clear outcome. It becomes then possible momentarily to break out of the circle of intentionality with the purity of meaning that bespeaks the coincidence of being and essence:

You will stay on, restive, serene in
Your gesture which is neither embrace nor warning
But which holds something of both in pure
Affirmation that doesn't affirm anything. (70)

The expression of the figure in the portrait is neither the invention of pathos nor yet the raw originality of experience. There are several ways in which the poem tries to capture this complex moment that is and is not. The smile in the portrait, for example, is likened to the spark or star that almost missed retinal capture, so that its presence is not quite memory nor merely imaginary: it can thus be the registration of that effort which the hand in the foreground makes to fence in or shore up the face, unlikely though the

proportions might be as light from these body parts struck the surface of Parmigianino's convex mirror and in turn got transferred to the convex painting.

The light for which the smile is the metaphorical tenor is neither intention alone nor fulfilment; it is both: "A perverse light whose / Imperative of subtlety dooms in advance its / Conceit to light up: unimportant but meant" (70). Neither the poem's reading of the painting, nor its own aesthetic then, is entirely hostage to the aura of the painting. Ironic distance breaks through at every point with its skewing perspective, so that the poem is always, though only just, falling short of complete empathy with the painting. Referential certainty is in Platonic recession, as Parmigianino sets out to copy all that he saw in the convex mirror, "Chiefly his reflection, of which the portrait / Is the reflection, of which the portrait / Is the reflection once removed" (68). Thus ironic distance—which is audible in Ashbery's description of the soul imprisoned within the painting, for example—is not only possible but inevitable. Parmigianino's mirror "chose to reflect only what he saw" (68). His decision to record all that he saw was meant "to perfect and rule out the extraneous / Forever" (72). The poem on the other hand—as is clear from what it sees in the painting—reinstates the extraneous,²⁴ and states its agenda openly and clearly: "What we need now is this unlikely / Challenger pounding on the gates of an amazed / Castle" (76). The wind of this change "brings what it knows not, is / Self-propelled, blind, has no notion / Of itself" (75).²⁵ The extraneous stares at us through what we see in the mirror: "This otherness, this "Not-being-us" is all there is to

²⁴ In their important article "John Ashbery and the Articulation of the Social," S.P. Mohanty and Jonathan Monroe have argued that it is the reinstatement of the extraneous that constitutes the poem's chief preoccupation: see Mohanty and Monroe 40 and *passim*.

²⁵ Interestingly, this wind comes bearing "Whispers of the word that can't be understood / But can be felt, a chill, a blight / Moving outward along the capes and peninsulas / Of your nervures and so to the archipelagos / And to the bathed, aired secrecy of the open sea. / This is its negative side" (75).

look at / In the mirror, though no one can say / How it came to be this way” (81). We thus come back full circle to difficulty as the density of looking itself. The extraneity of the ‘other’ presents a radical dualism that Ashbery’s concerted problematization of the subject cannot fully transcend. But the desire to join the ‘other’ in this ‘outside’ is nevertheless enacted through the projection of the subject from an emptied-out interiority on to the estranging surface of the mirror: the self and its other enjoy virtual proximity here.

One of the most dramatic early instances of Ashbery’s lyric self breaking free of its interiority is “How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher...” from *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962). The cryptic nature of difficulty is literalized here as a voice from the grave. The allusive framework is pervasively, though not exclusively Biblical, though at one point the speaker declares himself under the name of “Tom” (“I’m / Named Tom”),²⁶ so that it might be a sceptical ‘Doubting Thomas’ rather than Christ who occupies this “divine sepulchre.” This rather exquisite poem invites much speculation, but I will restrict myself to commenting briefly on the trope of internment and its transformations. Here are the initial stanzas:

How much longer will I be able to inhabit the divine sepulcher
Of life, my great love? Do dolphins plunge bottomward
To find the light? Or is it rock
That is searched? Unrelentingly? Huh. And if some day
Men with orange shovels come to break open the rock
Which encases me, what about the light that comes in then?
What about the smell of the light?
What about the moss? (25)

The paradox here is that life itself is the sepulcher, and escape is contemplated in both directions: as rising up as the world above breaks open the surrounding rock, and

alternatively, as plunging deeper into the abyss in hopes of a negative means of retrieving the lost 'light' or 'rock'—*claritas* or silent resistance. If a linear development is attributed to the poem, the concluding lines indicate that the solution might be amplified interiority, with the crypt transformed into an immense gulf that only anomalies of nature can navigate:

Stars
Painted the garage roof crimson and black
He is not a man
Who can read these signs . . . his bones were stays . . . (26; ellipses in original)

The reader of enigmatic stars is none other than a whale, whose flexible 'bones' or baleen was used in stays. And such wisdom can be ascribed to no whale but the legendary Moby Dick, himself a hieroglyph, as Melville takes care to point out.²⁷ The radical exteriority of the non-human thus presents itself as the most persuasive escape route to freedom from and of knowledge. Unlike the smooth but opaque surface of the mirror that permits only virtual depth, this poem imagines depth, but only for the dead and the non-human.

Difficulty is shown here as an encryption that can be decrypted by no human mind, including that of the author, but only by the utterly inhuman, albino whale, destroyer of the questing self. This is one of the rare moments in which Ashbery steps beyond human-affect zones into true exteriority. But even when circumscribed within a limiting humanism, Ashbery's poetry attempts ceaselessly to flatten the interiority of the self by

²⁶ The poem also contains numerous echoes of Eliot's *The Waste Land* and "Prufrock"; the 'Tom' might therefore refer to 'Thomas Stearns Eliot' as well.

²⁷ An allusion in "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" indicates that Melville continues to be an important mediator for Ashbery's sense of the relationship between man and nature:

Francesco, your hand is big enough
To wreck the sphere, [...]
(Big, but not coarse, merely on another scale,
Like a dozing whale on the sea bottom
In relation to the tiny, self-important ship
On the surface.) (70)

thematizing the extraneous.

The Aesthetics of the Extraneous

The eruption of the ‘extraneous’ into the performance of human intention finds a good correlative and generator in the technique of linguistic collage that Ashbery often uses in his early poems. The unexpected neighbourliness imposed by enforced juxtaposition provokes temporal and spatial dislocations that designate the human subject as capable of exercising choice and bypassing narrative. In that sense, collage arrests history, but its elements and its choices continue to take their imperatives from history. If the argument of “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” about the extraneous is valid, history might well continue to leak through negative presencing, because the extraneous is in principle welcome in collage. In “Europe,” which appears in what is widely acknowledged as Ashbery’s most cryptic work, *The Tennis Court Oath*, the persistent elisions and absences that transform the 1914 adventure novel *Beryl of the Biplane*²⁸ into a postmodern conundrum point to the negative presence of that which successfully evades mental representations and imperils the self-legislated positions of power that the post-Enlightenment Western subject has come to occupy and command. This power had been predicated upon the power to represent, the power to pin the object down through discursive and analytic framing and captivation: it was legitimized through the fittedness of representation and what is represented through practices that preserve intention. An artistic practice that is no longer willing to commit itself to this ‘fittedness,’ but on the

²⁸ For an excellent analysis of Ashbery’s use of William Le Queux’s *Beryl of the Biplane* in “Europe,” see Shoptaw 57-63. Perhaps because of the very limited availability of the novel, or because the form of the poem *The Tennis Court Oath* in general discourages any sort of empirical investigation, extended comparisons of the ‘original’ novel and “Europe” have been very rare.

other hand opens the work to what is outside intention in effect undermines the human subject that has for so long enjoyed imperious dominance and sovereignty. What seemed so natural and right now crinkles into wrongs and errors, and difficulty becomes the art of the extraneous.

The status of the human subject under the regime of the extraneous is rarely presented in any but negative terms in Ashbery, and often through vaguely ironic presentations of the ‘good’ moments of humanism. This is perhaps inevitable in a medium that is historically and substantially the produce of human subjects, even if not as individuals. The spectacle of a language that withdraws the usual comforts of communication through language, namely rational thought, familiar emotions, and customary gestures, creates a sense of vertigo that recalls the Romantic sublime. The verbal estrangement through which the aesthetic of the extraneous is realized generates a breakdown in the ‘normal’ conception of the human subject. The effect of reading such poetry is similar to the experience of the sublime in the sense that one is confronted by one’s inability to grasp the whole in any possible way. What exactly is this poem doing? What is it saying? Who is it for? Inasmuch as the awareness of human finitude is an integral part of the experience of this poetry, what we sense in its difficulty is a return of the sublime. As overwhelming, incomprehensible presence, the sublime has re-emerged in postmodern historical experience as the Holocaust, as the Gulag, as Maoist Cultural Revolution, and as unending Imperialism. Ashbery’s rearrangement of the First-World-War narrative of *Beryl of the Biplane* into the emptied-out spaces and shell-shocked disjunctions of “Europe” must therefore be understood as a profoundly historical act.²⁹

²⁹ David Herd’s historicization of “Europe” follows a different—and not a very convincing—route. He argues that it is an attempt to provide a “cure” for “a degraded cultural condition” indicated by works of

If the radical premise of collage is nothing less than assembling challenges to the unity and integrity of the human as given, its dependence upon what already exists as part of the known human world makes it always open to a backward looking nostalgia that belies the desire for change.³⁰ The fragments of “Europe” therefore never become the purely self-reflexive expression of what Ortega y Gasset called “dehumanized art.”

Consider, for instance, section 14:

Absolve me from hatred I never
she—all are wounded against
Zeppelin—wounded carrying dying
three colors over land
thistles again closed around voice.
She is dying—
automatically—
wanting to see you again, but the stone
must be rebuilt. Time stepped (*The Tennis Court Oath* 66)

The text is a tissue of syntactically unrelated sentence fragments. Words appear in a random fashion, with what appears (at least initially) to be mindless mechanical selection substituting for syntactic or semantic protocols. The first line mimics speech one might expect in a confessional, but absolution might also be preparatory to extreme unction, for

pulp fiction like *Beryl of the Biplane* (88). Ashbery’s love for objects of ‘low culture’ and the consistency and lack of irony with which pulp fiction and images from popular culture appear in his work would hardly permit such a reading.

³⁰ The collage might equally be seen, of course, as an act of disassembling. In his 1988 interview with John Tranter, Ashbery describes the logic behind the more experimental pieces in *The Tennis Court Oath* in terms similar to those used to describe Analytic and Synthetic Cubism: “My intention was to be after... kind of... taking language apart so I could look at the pieces that made it up. I would eventually get around to putting them back together again, and would then have more of a knowledge of how they worked, together” (Interview with John Tranter). On the whole, Ashbery has tended to dismiss this volume as a series of experiments less valuable in themselves than as preparatory to more successful future poems. Critics have generally agreed, except for those belonging to or particularly sympathetic to the Language School, for whom this volume constitutes Ashbery’s highest achievement. See, for instance, Andrew Ross’s essay “Taking *The Tennis Court Oath*.” For an overview of Ashbery’s significance for the Language poets, see Peter Nicholls, “John Ashbery and Language Poetry.” Nicholls’ analysis also more or less follows Ashbery’s own reading of the book as a compendium of technical possibilities that would be used with greater aesthetic intelligence in later works. In 2008, Ashbery exhibited his own collages, mostly from the 1970s, at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York. Some of the images are available online; see “The Collages of John Ashbery.” See Davis for a review of Ashbery’s exhibition.

example, as the numerous references to dying later in the text might suggest. The confession box transacts the penitential owning up of sin and the sacramental bestowal of absolution. The references to “wanting to see you again” and rebuilding recall theological themes: the desire to be with Christ (and other saints) on the Day of Judgment; and the rebuilding of the Temple: Christ’s resurrection was described by him as the rebuilding of the Temple (see John 2:19, for example). Eschatological concerns intersect with patriotic ones. The trope of *pro patria mori* is reinforced by images suggesting the wounded carrying the dying, the tricolor (“three colors over land”) flag, and above all by the historically specific reference to the First World War Zeppelin.

The incomplete and truncated, even mutilated nature of the images and themes, while predictable in collage, also makes use of the feelings of patriotism and devotion to carry the weight of the poem’s popular appeal. While a degree of nonspecificity in reference (it is “three colors” and not the French tricolor flag specifically that is actually being referred to; pining to see somebody also has a primary non-eschatological reference) makes for moments of irony, the specificity of reference in some matters (Zeppelin, the wounded, the dying) draw upon previous knowledge and prior modes of empathetic understanding. It is not possible to treat the wounded and the dying as mere word-play, for example. ‘Zeppelin’ is not a nonce word devoid of history or emotional color. The perspective on the whole is clearly an Allied one, perhaps English, perhaps French.³¹ War, death, and pain are always this war, this death, and this pain. Their ontological primacy and priority—which is never questioned by Ashbery—come precisely

³¹ Predictably enough, the Zeppelin and aviation in general were matters of considerable fascination in both Modernist high art and contemporary pulp literature. For a useful overview of the representation of the Zeppelin in British literature, see Freedman. In *Re-Covering Modernism*, David M. Earle has discussed aviation themes in Faulkner; see Earle 200-201.

out of the universalism of affect guaranteed by the coincidence of the universal and the particular.³² Nobody denies patriotic feelings to the Germans, nor death as other than personal and national catastrophe, nor the reality of pain for the German wounded. Many war poems, especially of the First World War, deal with the paradox of cross-border sympathy. The extension of humanity across the border is an ontologically obvious but historically and personally a perilous and arduous task. Allied languages seek war damages from foes no less readily than the governments: difficulty is the indicated mode for a poem that does not.

There is thus an inalienably fundamental and unquestioned ideological core in Ashbery's work that falls back upon models of subjectivity that other, 'difficult' elements in his work implicitly as well as explicitly challenge and reject. Patriotism for example, or the comfort of the certainty of religious salvation, are neither universal nor indeed over-the-counter, non-prescription remedies in any deep sense. Social choice is always commandeered from elsewhere than here. The strenuous heterogeneity of subject and form that is so characteristic of Ashbery very clearly serves to fragment the coherence of the social whole, especially since no singular voice or authority dominates the proceedings. The skeptical turn however, is as much a principle of retail rejection as of infinite accommodation. So whenever nostalgic humanism shows itself, it is in imminent danger of being mistaken for the positive, inclusive moment of the skeptical imagination. Maintaining humanist enclaves in this manner, however minimally, prevents the

³² In "Understanding Ashbery," Vendler insightfully complains about the "willful flashiness and sentimentality" of *The Tennis Court Oath* (Vendler 182), but refuses to explain it. Despite its experimental credentials, the book is indeed a very 'sentimental' work. When using the term 'sentimental,' Vendler might have had in mind poems like "How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher..." (*The Tennis Court Oath* 25-27), but even poems such as "Europe" and "Leaving the Atocha Station" sustain a distinct thematic of emotional and physical suffering expressed in fairly conventional terms.

formation of the awareness of what I term ‘complicity’ in the following chapter. It is not that it is wrong to be horrified by violence, for example, but that the human being who is horrified by violence could also be the being who is ‘innocently’ unaware of its own role in the conduct and institution of that violence. Intimations of this paradox do exist in Ashbery’s poetry, but they are few and far between, and never constitute any very critical component of his poetics. Citation of stock reactions within ironic frameworks does not necessarily constitute or perform critical self-awareness. The extraneous must have the freedom to return as intimacy.

Difficulty and Restrictive Form

This is also true about his use of traditional and restrictive poetic forms like the pantoum and the sestina. *Some Trees* (1956) has three sestinas, and *The Tennis Court Oath* has one. He would return to the form in “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape,” which appeared in the 1970 volume *The Double Dream of Spring*. These poetic forms offer yet another means of clearing up spaces for the performance of alterity.³³ They enable the exploration of areas normally closed to consciousness, as Ashbery says in an interview:

[T]hese forms such as the sestina were really devices at getting into remoter areas of consciousness. The really bizarre requirements of a sestina I use as a probing tool rather than as a form in the traditional sense. I once told somebody that writing a sestina was rather like riding downhill on a bicycle and having the pedals push your feet. I wanted my feet to be pushed into places they wouldn't normally have taken. (Bloom and Losada 124)

³³ For an excellent analysis of Ashbery’s use of the sestina in the context of the history of the sestina from its origins in Provençal poetry and Petrarch onwards, see Marianne Shapiro, chapter 6, in particular pages 205-209. Also see Stephen Burt’s “Sestina! Or, The Fate of the Idea of Form,” particularly pages 227-231, for an overview of Ashbery’s sestinas. Margaret Spanos’ essay “The Sestina: An Exploration of the Dynamics of Poetic Structure” is indispensable for any historically sensitive analysis of the sestina form.

The exploration of the origins and forms of subjectivity through mind-altering procedures and drugs can be taken as an extreme metaphor of the period for individuals seeking to reset their bearings past innocence: overriding taboo and restriction consciously would be impossible for the human subject that was generated precisely by those very forces. Ashbery himself points to this dilemma in a recent interview when he says the use of abstract poetic ‘forms’ enabled bypassing the powers of the conscious mind that are replicated in all mechanisms of social control:

Well, the pantoum or the sestina, which we all use occasionally, are forms which take the poem really out of the hands of the poet in attempting to satisfy the constraints that are the trademark of these forms. Therefore one can allow one’s unconscious mind to go about forming the poem in a way that is even more effective than what the Surrealists practice, called “unconscious writing,” which I don’t think ever gets that far from consciousness. Having to accomplish a task that is almost mechanical is a far more effective way of liberating one’s unconscious mind to write the poem. That’s only one small example, though. In general, I think we intended to avoid the classical norms that were dominant in poetry. When we were in college, for instance, we were kind of rebelling against the academic climate by any means that we could. (Wright)

Obedience to arbitrary (rather than ‘natural’) form—the Modernist evolution of ‘free form’ earlier in the century was meant to break free of the constraints imposed by a superintending subject (read, social function) and install a more ‘natural’ metaphysics for the conduct of art—could be a form of civil disobedience, an evasion of the draft, a refusal to mourn for needless death.

The sestina’s tendency to suppress its own highly artificial structure makes it sympathetic to all manner of subterfuge. Edward Brunner’s historicization of the sestina’s popularity during the Cold War is thus based on the form’s “secrecy”:

In one sense, the sestina is the ultimate test of how well a poet can write a formal poem whose formal features are not obtrusive. But the deception required for the sestina’s form to be suppressed calls for measures most extreme. The

willingness of poets to fall into complicity with such accommodations suggests that there was a time when secrecy was not a disvalue but an acceptable procedure, especially if its end result could be justified by establishing an intimate space for the individual. Sestinas may flourish, then, in direct proportion to the unease poets feel when it comes to speaking freely about themselves in poetry that is personally meaningful to their private lives. (Brunner 182)

Brunner's account makes it possible to think of Ashbery's sestinas not just as instances of freewheeling linguistic creativity but also as expressions of the interdicts under which self-expression takes place in an increasingly conservative America.³⁴ To this extent, he adds to John Shoptaw's argument that the stigma against homosexuality in the early 1950s encouraged Ashbery to develop a mode of textual encryption and evasion that Shoptaw describes as "homotextual" (*On the Outside* 4 and *passim*). But Ashbery's description of the allure of forms such as the sestina indicates that he is not primarily attracted to a mode that surreptitiously carves out spaces for the expression of a tabooed privacy.³⁵ Rather, formal restrictions allow him to stray from known modes of subjectivity—this is undoubtedly part of Ashbery's Surrealist and Oulipo sympathies, and Oulipo's fascination with extreme formalism as an escape from ideological determination cannot be unproblematically linked to the modes of social surveillance associated with McCarthyism.

This is one reason why the lyric is formally the most variously intricate mode of poetry. Letting the form dictate the structure and movement of the poem is a significant abdication of agency, especially in times of carnivorous late-capitalist individualism. The importance and gestural significance of relinquishing agency arises also in the context of

³⁴ While Brunner describes the form as almost exclusive to the 1950s, the sestina and other complex constructs persist in Ashbery's later work as well. This would then indicate Ashbery's continuing discomfort with self-disclosure—for which he has, of course, a repertoire of solutions that far exceeds the sestina or similar restrictive forms.

historic acts of violence that can neither possibly be ‘owned’ nor owned up to. Are all Americans guilty of the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam? Or the genocide of native Americans—can it even be termed ‘genocide’? The fate of the smallest unitary component of the state, the so-called individual, in the face of such collective guilt is a complex one, and involves individual choice in the matter of owning up or disowning such acts of statal violence. The way the manner of Sylvia Plath’s death commemorates the deaths of millions of Jews in the Nazi gas chambers is a small reminder of how inexorably intertwined the fates of individuals and lost communities might get to be, and also how elegiac poetic justice and empathy have gotten to be. Poetry makes nothing happen at least partly because the writing as well as the reading of poetry now take place in a severely diminished private sphere. This attenuation of agential power renders the lyric an imperilled mode in the late twentieth century. Forms of the difficult are therefore also forms of the lyric in retreat, as it were.

The general disfavor with which traditional poetic forms have been treated in the twentieth century is the result of a reaction against the authority of tradition rather than against form itself. The leaders of the *vers libre* tendency were themselves accomplished masters in the art of traditional versification—Pound and Eliot, for example. The overall argument had been that the variousness and newness of the subjects modern poets had to deal with required new and freer forms. There was, Williams would claim, a big difference between what a sonnet could say and what it couldn’t, and the modern world was not amenable to being partitioned into sonnets. This ‘fittedness’ argument, whereby every content had a unique form in which it could be addressed, enforced a separation

³⁵An influential definition of Oulipo represents this approach to freedom through constraint that is in turn predicated on the freedom to construct one’s own constraints: “Oulipiens: Rats qui ont à construire le

between the how and the what of poems in a way that often ignored the shifting and variable nature of their interaction in relation to the production of actual poems. The Modernists' general rejection of 'traditional' form and their adoption of vers libre modes in the name of artistic freedom and autotelic form made it difficult to be anything but free. This version of organic form was in fact a fallback upon Romantic theory—a fact that is difficult to recognize only because of the unusual changeover demanded and sustained. Artifice itself was not really an issue, as it was during the Romantic period, for example. Ashbery's turn to traditional form is therefore not in the least surprising in a century devoted to artifice, and to some extent counterbalances his latent humanism. But instead of generating the radically new, as Ashbery hoped, these generative forms tend to repeat—albeit in novel ways—that which is already known.

Ashbery in fact addresses these issues in his early sestina, "The Painter" (1948). The subject of the poem is a painter who sets out to paint a portrait of the sea. Exercising the maximum possible negative capability, he expects the sea to paint itself into being. For the residents of the buildings around, his problem is that he uses the brush as an end in itself, and not as a means. Effacing itself in favor of a complete takeover by nature and natural object, his art becomes incapable of any productivity. There are no seamless exit routes between the world given in experience and the world of art. Mimesis is at best mediated. When he chooses his wife as his next subject, the painting appears as if without any agential contribution:

He chose his wife for a new subject,
 Making her vast, like ruined buildings,
 As if, forgetting itself, the portrait
 Had expressed itself without a brush. (*Selected Poems* 20)

labyrinthe dont ils se proposent de sortir" (Oulipo, *La Littérature Potentielle* 36).

The disappearance of art is the precondition for mimetic success. The ruined buildings provide the verbal counterpart of the visual experience. The materiality of art, which is borrowed from the world of experience, disappears in its reappearance as art. The ‘as if’ of art is the hiatus across which artistic performance locates itself. Turning the world into the (artistic) medium of its own expression is the next stage as the artist dips his brush into the sea, murmuring a prayer to himself: “My soul, when I paint this next portrait / Let it be you who wrecks the canvas” (*Selected Poems* 20). His persistence in trying to paint the portrait of the ever-changing sea provokes other artists to mirth—painting is about stasis, and painting an ever-changing subject such as the sea is a doomed endeavor. According to some artists, this new attempt results in a self-portrait: a common situation, especially when the subject is as changeable and the artist as keen, so that what is painted comes so much from within the artist himself as to constitute a self-portrait. This Romantic inversion, whereby the external object becomes pure self-expression, in fact leads directly to abstract art: “Finally all indications of a subject / Began to fade, leaving the canvas / Perfectly white. He put down the brush” (*Selected Poems* 21). The disappearance of the subject denotes the emergence of a ‘pure’ art: one that is autotelic and self-authenticating. The white canvas and the painter become indistinguishable by the time the sestina moves towards its envoi: “They tossed him, the portrait, from the tallest of the buildings; / And the sea devoured the canvas and the brush / As though his subject had decided to remain a prayer” (*Selected Poems* 21). As an allegory of art, this is a dismal cautionary tale about the dangers of conflating nature and art.

The disappearance of art into its object is an affirmation of the object as the ineluctable boundary of desire, and of the work of art as bound to inescapable

objecthood. There is a deep *mise en abyme* working here that is also played out in terms of the *sestina* form. The progression of *teleutons* through a *sestina* happens according to a scheme known as the *retrogradatio cruciata* or ‘retrograde cross.’³⁶ Line 25, the beginning of the fifth stanza, refers to a crucifixion: “Imagine a painter crucified by his subject!” The repeated key words are a cross against which the poet is ‘nailed,’ as it were. These words impart object-like edges to the poem, and contribute to its physical and experiential reality as artifact. This is no fragment broken from the usages of a language community, but a linguistic contrivance that is put together according to a definite plan and paradigm. Elements of design show up everywhere. But one can see the cross only at the expense of Christ, and Christ only at the expense of his cross. The true and essential subject of the *sestina* is this cross, and to that extent, the narrative or the mythos stretched out against and across it in the poem is self-referential. Like the white canvas in the poem, this gathering of words doesn’t quite have a subject outside itself. The white canvas, devoid of the traces of any component colors, thus becomes a figure denoting the intransitivity of art.

If intransitivity is an aesthetic goal, the poem itself seems to enact that goal in all but one respect, and that is its adherence to what might be called the pathos of the human. In the foothold-denying practice of Ashbery’s intransitive art, passages into the known are neither privileged nor are they the norm. The exploitation of humanist pathos frequently and on a consistent basis in Ashbery therefore comes through as unexpected and uncritical. Who is shocked by the idea of the artist crucified by his subject? What or who is the addressee of prayer? Melodramatic work on well-tuned heartstrings is one way in which to veil the structure of the poem: the delayed perception of artifice is one of the

³⁶ See Spanos 546 for an explication of the term.

playful effects of the sestina and similar contrived forms. This ‘distraction’ through sentiment happens very effectively in “The Painter.” Most of the teleutons are bland though painterly words: buildings, portrait, brush, and canvas. The others, also nouns, denote deep human experience and—variably—the experiencer: prayer, subject. The sensationalism (read sentimentalism) takes attention away from the repetitiveness of the words. Thus when stanza 5 opens with the line “Imagine a painter crucified by his subject!”, the incongruous violence of the image manages to squeeze significant rhetorical momentum out of the word ‘subject,’ despite the fact that it is the concluding word of the previous stanza and has been appearing punctually in every stanza before it. In the final envoi, the pathos and eeriness of the sacrifice of the painter/portrait keeps alive the tension between mechanical form and emotionally charged content. The theme of representational failure is complemented as well as disputed by the poem’s controlled formal environment.

The perception of pathos has been a significant topos for many poets, and tragedy branched off into a separate mode of literary production. Wordsworth’s perception of the “still sad music of humanity” is echoed in Arnold’s classically informed perception of the “eternal note of sadness” that is audible at Dover beach as clearly as it was on the beaches of the Aegean to Sophocles. Stevens had to caution the Modernist sentimentalist not to “think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind, / In the sound of a few leaves” if winter were to be perceived at all. A rose had to be a rose to be a rose. If surrogate subjecthood is not to be the only fate of the object within the work of artistic representation, a fundamental transformation in the functioning of the human subject of representation had to be accomplished. Envisioning the nature of this change is

problematic because only by already being the change can the change begin to be known or effected. Schiller's well-known apology for aesthetic education is the point of departure for thinking this thought here. The presence of sentiment and pathos in a poetry that has invested so much in the means of the radical possibilities of artifice therefore comes less as censorious surprise than as mild disappointment.

The Poetic of Non-Disclosure

The prime prophylactic for the terror of saying—a terror engendered as much by the Modernist poet's proclivity for totalitarianism as by Postmodern fears of right-wing persecution—is to let language break loose from the imperatives of intention and reference. Mysterious utterances can bespeak either a political regime which punishes truthful uses of language, or an epistemic condition that makes truth a mere function of history, or indeed both—which is how it is in Ashbery's case. Historical relativism and epistemic uncertainty are causally linked phenomena, but the abandonment of art to the purely aleatory is always an abyss from which his residual humanism instinctively draws back. Difficulty in Ashbery's work is part of an aesthetic of sceptical engagedness for which being drawn back to the known is as difficult to resist as being committed to the unknown. The resulting poetry is a mixture of the mimetic and the creative orders. It is also ambiguous, or even unconvinced about the ethical validity of a fully non-disclosing or 'pure' poetry, however. In *Rivers and Mountains* (1966) he continues, albeit with modifications, the breakthroughs he accomplished in *The Tennis Court Oath* by repeating the tone, topoi, and sometimes even the vocabulary of poems like "Europe" and "How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit This Divine Sepulcher...." But it is in the later

collection, particularly in the long poem “The Skaters,” that we can understand the concerns about the nature of difficulty that compel Ashbery to disown his more experimental works, though my foregoing discussion shows that even these works eschew some of the most alienating possibilities of poetic difficulty.

Like “Europe,” “The Skaters” too is a long poem that draws considerably from another book, this time a book for young boys called *Three Hundred Things a Bright Boy Can Do*. The title of the poem was apparently not inspired by the book. According to David Kermani, Ashbery named “The Skaters” after *Les Patineurs*, a 1937 medley by Constant Lambert of the skaters’ ballet from Giacomo Meyerbeer’s opera, *Le Prophète* (Kermani 81). While *Les Patineurs* is indeed based on the skaters’ ballet in Act III of *Le Prophète*, Lambert also used sections from Meyerbeer’s *L’Etoile du Nord* to compose the piece (Willier 137): the cut-up technique neatly parallels Ashbery’s formal interests at the time. Ashbery later speculates that his interest in *Les Patineurs* was on account of “a discrepancy between what the music was originally written for—it’s made up of extracts from serious operas rearranged into a kind of superficial, supposedly comic ballet. This seemed like the kind of credibility [he liked] to investigate” (qtd. in Kermani 81). It is significant that *L’Etoile du Nord* is itself composed of fragments of Meyerbeer’s first foray into the ‘comic’ genre—the German Singspiel *Ein Feldlager in Schlesien* (1844)—and represents his ‘lighter’ work (Willier 137-38). The layered history of *Les Patineurs* is thus in active dialogue with its thematization of superficial pleasures: the density of congealed surfaces turns depth into an opportunity for play, and Ashbery’s own dialogue with *Three Hundred Things a Bright Boy Can Do* and its multiple and anonymous authors is mediated through both

Meyerbeer's and Lambert's recycled products.³⁷

Compared to "Europe," his borrowings from *Three Hundred Things* are not extensive: while the 'scavenging' mode and the 'creative' mode are equally important aspects of the creative process—especially for this poet—in "The Skaters," the latter begins to take a predominant role. Since texts appear in the company of other texts, and make sense only in a cultural context of textual productivity, intertextuality is not so much a device as an inevitable record of inescapable filiation. The materiality of texts and their existence for themselves denote the autotelic purity of their existence, and make reference collapse in the final analysis into self-reference. The self-referential moments of this text enable its assimilation as itself and as commentary on itself.³⁸ But the textual constitution of subjectivity comes with a necessarily ironized stance, and reading must tread warily lest it fall into the quicksand of the intentional fallacy. In the reading that follows, I shall proceed, however, with more alacrity than caution, since I believe that this kind of a difficult text is an occasion for the indeterminate openness of dialogue rather than the determinate finality of illumination: after all, the parallel lines that the skaters make on the snow meet only in the vanishing points provided by art.

One way in which the poem thematizes its own procedures and difficulty is by explicitly discussing secrets and encrypted messages. As in the case of the medieval *trobar*

³⁷ In the "Craft Interview," Ashbery offers additional information on the sources for "The Skaters": ["The Skaters"] is a meditation on my childhood which was rather solitary. I grew up on a farm in a region of very hard winters and I think the boredom of my own childhood was what I was remembering when I wrote that poem—the stamp albums, going outside to try and be amused in the snow. [...] Also an imaginary voyage prompted by the sight of a label or a postage stamp was again a memory of childhood—and also I guess of certain of Raymond Roussel's poems such as "La Vue," an epic-length poem describing a scene viewed inside the hollow handle of a paper knife. (Bloom and Losada 119-20)

³⁸ David Shapiro's remark in his introduction to Ashbery's work is apposite here: "The best poetry of our day is, moreover, a form of literary criticism, both in drab and golden tones" (4).

clus,³⁹ such secrecy is often associated in Ashbery's poetry with power dispensations that prohibit the direct expression of dissatisfaction, so that resistance percolates into less immediate or even non-existent layers of meaning.⁴⁰ The title poem of *Rivers and Mountains*, for instance, teems with references to secret maps, duplicitous papier-mâché landscapes, and letters intended for the desks of 'unassassinated presidents' (10-12). Other poems in the collection, including "Last Month," "The Recent Past," and "The Thousand Islands," carry references to treason or unintelligibility, usually in their concluding lines. In "The Skaters," encryption is mostly presented as a child's pastime. One of the boys' activities that the poem describes in some detail is the creation of invisible images or "fire designs":

In my day we used to make "fire designs," using a saturated solution of nitrate of potash.
 Then we used to take a smooth stick, and using the solution as ink, draw with it on sheets of white tissue paper.
 Once it was thoroughly dry, the writing would be invisible.
 By means of a spark from a smoldering match ignite the potassium nitrate at any part of the drawing,
 First laying the paper on a plate or tray in a darkened room.
 The fire will smolder along the line of the invisible drawing until the design is complete. (50)

The matter-of-fact instructions hide the fact that these works of art are made with the same chemical—potassium nitrate—that is the prime ingredient in gunpowder.

³⁹ Chambers notes that according to some accounts, the poet Marcabru, who is considered the earliest practitioner of the *trobar clus*, resorts to ambiguity for political reasons:

[Marcabru was] a veiled antagonist of the courtly ideals professed by the rich nobles of his day. Living among these persons and dependent on them for sustenance, he could hardly afford to attack them directly, but couched his poems in a language susceptible of interpretation on more than one level. [For Köhler,] Marcabru is intentionally ambiguous, so that a courtly audience will find an innocuous message in his poems, while those familiar with the poet's true feelings will discover, hidden beneath the surface, a very different message meant for them. (Chambers 96)

⁴⁰ Shoptaw suggests this possibility in his reading of *Some Trees*: "Written during the McCarthy years, many of the poems in *Some Trees* exhibit both the agility and the power of evasion" (21). He also alludes to the writer's block that Ashbery encountered during this "dispiriting and frightening period," and the role of John Cage's music in giving him a new sense of artistic, if not political, freedom (21).

Invisibility is thus another mode of encryption and signals the presence of explosive secrets.

The only other activity described in detail involves another incendiary experiment using sulfuric acid, water, zinc, and phosphorous in order to create a ‘fire fountain.’ The bright boy is promised that

The whole surface of the liquid will become luminous, and fire balls, with jets of fire,
Will dart from the bottom, through the fluid with great rapidity and a hissing noise. (49)

The visual spectacle, which is soon described with infernal negativity as “smoldering and welling / Casting off a hellish stink and wild fumes of pitch / Acrid as jealousy” and as an “insane activity,” (50) encodes, among other things, the mushrooming terror of nuclear proliferation in Cold War America. The poem is certainly aware that the classic tropes of the Romantic pastoral are hardly means for escaping history: “The wind and treason are partners, turning secrets over to the military police” (37). The bathetic counterpoint of such clandestine communications constitutes another argument for the imperilled poet-messenger’s need for circumspection: the image of the innocuous postman with “a letter in his outstretched hand” (“This is his first day on the new job,” we are told) who is tragically unaware of the “hideous bulldog” whose Baskervillian “hellish eyes” are “fixed on the seat of his pants” (50) is a good example.⁴¹

Mysteriousness is part of the police state, but it is individuals who are at risk that

⁴¹ Undelivered letters constitute a frequent motif of failed communication in Ashbery’s works. For instance, in “Self-Portrait,” there is a reference to “an invitation” that was “never mailed” (82), and in section 5 of *Flow Chart*, we find a reference to lost letters: “And it left the same message. It was as though / it never got my previous message” (*Notes from the Air* 35). There are also references to letters delivered “forty-odd years after the day it was posted” (“Sortes Vergilianae,” *Selected Poems* 119); and letters that are “forgotten” and “[p]lucked away in trunks in the attic” (“Grand Galop,” *Selected Poems* 177). This is, of course, only a partial list, but Ashbery’s use of letters, particularly in the plenitude of the word’s self-reflexive possibilities, is a fertile area of investigation.

have to take precautions and employ tactics of evasion. If this is a Cold War thematic of secrecy, its elevation to a principle of postmodern poetics is an indication of how close the political atmosphere was into which this poetry found itself fetched. But mystery was also actively solicited. Ashbery said apropos of the composition of “The Skaters” in an unpublished interview:

What I originally intended to do in ‘The Skaters’ was to use the titles of the section [sic] from [Three Hundred Things a Bright Boy Can Do] as titles – at the head of each section. I began it that way actually, with a list of titles rather like the sort of table of contents at the beginning of a Milton canto. I began this way, but then I found that the poem was a lot more mysterious if I removed the scaffolding of titles. (Qtd. in Kermani 80-81; C119)

The poem’s thematization of modes of encryption as well as its own cryptic use of language, then, derives from an explicit aesthetic of mystery. But mystification is as efficient a tool in the hands of authoritarian enterprises as in the words of the prognosticating Sybil and the procrastinating poet, and so mysteriousness or difficulty takes its ethical valence from the specific contexts in which it appears rather than from any inherent ethical import. The history of encryption is in fact an integral part of organized violence: most methods of encryption were developed in the context of military communication.⁴² Hence while mysteriousness is a means of absenting oneself from unjust social formations, it also simultaneously generates anxieties about complicity in those very formations.

One of the ways in which such an awareness of complicity is signalled in the poem is through the presentation of its speaking voices within a stance of

⁴² See, for instance, the history of the German Enigma machine and its role in the development of allied cryptography; David Kahn’s essay provides a helpful overview. Also see David Walker’s “Cryptography, Desire, and the Secret Language of Nature” for a study of the relationship between nature poetry and encryption. Foucault’s *Order of Things* also contains an illuminating description of the pre-modern world’s understanding of phenomena as the encrypted will of God.

uncomprehending victimhood. The first line of the poem configures sensory perception itself metaphorically as a form of ritual suffering: “These decibels are a kind of flagellation” (34). The word ‘decibel’ carries a barely-suppressed complaint about loud noise beneath its apparently scientific specificity. This is an exasperated victim trying hard to be as objective as possible. Flagellation might be taken as private atonement for wrongs committed, but it can also be punishment meted out by a juridically competent, higher and public authority. The decibels might be a case of extreme tinnitus, or might have provenance in a source that is totally alien or antagonistic. This double awareness, brought about by the maintenance of the two or more ends of a paradox in a state of equal validity, is characteristic of Ashbery’s procedure. Specifically Christian forms of self-abasement are again invoked in his rewriting of words from the Egyptian Book of the Dead: “I am yesterday,’ and my fault is eternal” (35).⁴³ Ashbery’s telescoping of the Egyptian reference with the Christian idea of original sin recalls the Egyptian origins of much Christian eschatology, and cleverly juxtaposes the theologies of infinitude and fall. Infinite in principle and finite in parts is just the ontology necessary for the awareness of complicity.

Pre-emptive admissions of generalized and dehistoricized guilt make the abject speaker, who functions within inadequately specified identity zones, appear to be merely reflecting his own confusions through his mystifications. He dwells on “A child’s devotion” and “tears and eagerness” (35), and frequently receives bad news:

I try to sort out what has happened to me. The bundle of Gerard’s letters,
And that awful bit of news buried on the back page of yesterday’s paper.
Then the news of you this morning, in the snow.

⁴³ “I am yesterday” is a quotation from the Egyptian Book of the Dead. In Chapter XVII, Osiris says: “I am Yesterday; I know Tomorrow.” Again, in Chapter XLII, Osiris says: “I am yesterday, and my name is ‘Seer of a million years.’ I travel, I travel along the path of Horus the judge, I am the lord of eternity.”

Sometimes the interval
Of bad news is so brisk that . . . (36; ellipsis as in the original)

The proper noun that appears suddenly and without any explanatory introduction makes this a fragment not just of an utterance, but of a self-directedly lived life. We are neither the knowing interlocutor (“you”) nor the producer (“I”) of this utterance. Indefiniteness of reference also comes through the non-specification of the dates (“yesterday’s paper,” “this morning”). Deixis becomes as much an effect of self-referring language as of a hermetically and solipsistically sealed world. The utterance itself is addressed to someone to whom something has happened which contributes to the stream of bad news: this addressee might even be dead, given that this bit of news is given last in the string.

Occupying this position by empathetic identification reinforced through being one of the possible formal ‘you’s to the first person stance of the poem, the reader is alive and dead, virtual and real. This virtual subject position that the reader is interpellated into occupying is characterized by the possible conformist smugness that draws intemperate speech from the speaker: “I’d like to bugger you all up, / Deliberately falsify all your suck-ass notions / Of how chivalry is being lived” (41-42). But his inability to distinguish between self and other, along with his ontological uncertainties, quickly deactivate the pedagogical presumptions of this outburst, and it fizzles out into quantitative existentialism of a Steinian pedigree: “How much of any one person is there” (42).

The Child, the Non-Subject, the Ur-Subject

The performance of subjectivity derives from a core that is uncertain and unrepresentable, and takes the form of a secret. The authoritarian voices that appear in the text would appear to sustain a more certain, positively articulated, subject position.

For instance, part 3 begins with the following admonition:

Now you must shield with your body if necessary (you
remind me of some lummo I used to know) the secret your body is.
Yes, you are a secret and you must NEVER tell it (51-52)

Secrecy here is an ontological fact as well as an epistemic condition, but its continuation is the result of an imbalance of power. If the poet participates in the general conspiracy, it is on account of having a weak will and an excessive imagination—both infantile characteristics. Indeed, the punishment for divulging the secret of the self has a fantastical quality that might be persuasive only in the case of children: “the vapor / Of the stars would quickly freeze you to death, like a tear-stiffened handkerchief” (51). The general tendency of the poem to advert to suffering and victimhood is in fact often concentrated in the figure of the child.⁴⁴ Some of the early stanzas in particular emphasize the child’s helpless knowledge:

We children are ashamed of our bodies
But we laugh and, demanded, talk of sex again
And all is well. (34)

Childhood is the aspect of the human that is prior to ideologically constituted subjecthood. It is in this sense the one Archimedean point from which the workings of the mechanism for the social reproduction of human subjects may be observed and interventions imagined. From Romantic poetry onwards childhood is in this sense the period of the ur-subject, guaranteeing authenticity of experience and expression.

It is not difficult to agree with Lyotard that childhood is attractive precisely because it indicates in its nascence the possibilities rather than the completion of the human: here humanity is explicitly and exemplarily a process:

Dénué de parole, incapable de la station droite, hésitant sur les objets de son intérêt, inapte au calcul de ses benefices, insensible à la commune raison, l'enfant est éminemment l'humain parce que sa détresse annonce et promet les possibles. Son retard initial sur l'humanité, qui en fait l'otage de la communauté adulte, est aussi ce qui manifeste à cette dernière le manqué d'humanité dont elle souffre, et ce qui l'appelle à devenir plus humaine. (11-12)⁴⁵

From this zone arises a form of inhumanity (“l'autre inhumain”) that resists the coercive and regulatory force of rationality and certainty with “an inhuman power of deregulation” (“une puissance inhumaine de dérèglement”) (13). As not-yet-human, the child represents, one might argue, humanity under the sign of hope. But the capitulation to this evolutionary model of humanity, in which the inhuman serves as a constant check against the rigidifying forces of premature certainty, creates a temporal framework of deferral that militates against the urgency of the need to claim our own humanity instantaneously. The tremulous waiting that Poststructuralism suggests as an alternative to the disappointment of certitude, however, also raises the issue of the ethicality of postponed fulfilment. Imagining, envoicing, and enacting humanity in the present involve conceiving of time as inaccessible to human design, so that versions of strategic essentialism become inevitable. Irony levels the playing fields of ethical action, making the sceptic as proactive as the true believer. And yet the freedom and deliberate irony involved in the ‘strategic’ dimension of any essentialism (including humanism) risks being overcome by the undertow of the accumulated historical density of possible identity-positions. Thus, resisting temporal evolution and acceding to it can both produce equally

⁴⁴ Terence Diggory's *Encyclopedia of the New York School Poets* has an illuminating entry on “child, the.” It calls attention to not only Ashbery's interest in childhood but also a similar interest in numerous first- and second-generation New York School poets (Diggory 98-99). The entry also contains a useful bibliography.

⁴⁵ “Shorn of speech, incapable of standing upright, hesitating over the objects of its interest, not able to calculate its advantages, not sensitive to common reason, the child is eminently the human because its distress heralds and promises things possible. Its initial delay in humanity, which makes it the hostage of the adult community, is also what manifests to this community the lack of humanity it is suffering from, and which calls on it to become more human” (*The Inhuman* 3-4).

perplexing ethical problems.

Childhood need not be mere possibility: it can also be achieved humanity, with adulthood being the incomplete presentiment of perfection as childhood. This is often what childhood was for British Romantic poets, for instance. The utility of the model of a fall from perfection is that humanity can then possess an always-already-present-ness that resists retrieval only within strictly linear conceptions of time. The children in Ashbery's poetry—beginning with the early self-portrait “The Picture of Little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers” in *Some Trees*—experience the violence of the incomprehensible demands of the adult world.⁴⁶ The marginality and imaginative susceptibility of the poet-figure—who is described in one of the most self-reflexive passages in “The Skaters” as

⁴⁶ *Girls on the Run* (1999), in particular, is an extended treatment of the pathos of children occupying a half-comprehended adult world. As Roger Gilbert accurately observes, there is a clear transition here from the Mannerist high art of Parmigianino to the untrained and private art of Henry Darger, which inspired *Girls on the Run* (Gilbert 210-11). But the representation of childhood remains almost entirely unaltered across these texts. It is in fact possible to imagine that *Girls on the Run* is in many ways a book of the 70s than the 90s; the visual collages that Ashbery had completed during the 70s—including images of children, sometimes androgynous, cut out from magazines and pasted into fantastic landscapes—bear a striking resemblance to Darger's images, many of which use similar techniques and content. See, for instance, Ashbery's collages titled *Conservatory* and *Après un Reve* available on the *New York Times* website. It is not surprising, therefore, that Ashbery could easily identify with Darger's work. When asked about his interest in Darger, Ashbery answers, as he often does, by slipping into autobiography:

The girls are constantly under attack [in Darger] by violent enemy forces and being saved and surviving storms and evil armies. I was fascinated by little girls when I was a little boy, and their clothes and their games and their dolls appealed to me much more than what little boys are doing. Therefore I was sort of ostracized. (Rehak 15)

But he never makes explicit the relationship between his ‘fascination’ for little girls on the one hand, and the fact that in Darger's world, “girls are constantly under attack.” Yet it is this juxtaposition that fuels Ashbery's expedition into Darger's unreal realms. The violence that the girls are subjected to in Darger's fantastical yet brutal world parallel a number of moments in Ashbery's work, including sections of “The Skaters” and *Flowchart*, that present children in the context of partially-comprehended violence that often carry sexual undertones. For a very interesting analysis of *Girls on the Run* in the context of the Victorian eroticization of the girl child, see Bouilly 171-223. Interestingly, Andrew DuBois implies that there might be a sinister aspect to the late Ashbery's thematization of childhood:

[Ashbery] handles his children-material with whimsy, humor, sweetness, and irony; nevertheless, as he knows, an ugliness looms. Among the drolleries of dotage drifts the specter of pedophilia, which puts pressure on the more abstract pronouncements about value that appear in the poems. If we are meant to value the “old man” in late Ashbery, as I argue we must, we are nevertheless made by Ashbery to perceive that an “old man” can be sinister, too. (DuBois 123)

I personally don't find this entirely convincing, but the case does seem rather complicated when DuBois puts it this way.

replicating the aloof hoverings of the hot-air balloon or the “bubbles / Children make with a kind of ring, not a pipe, and probably using some detergent” (40)—aligns him with the mysteries and enthusiasms of a romanticized childhood. The voice of authority reappears a few stanzas later to enforce the distribution of power and agency:

“Remember, / No hope is to be authorized except in exceptional cases / To be decided on by me. In the meantime, back to dreaming, / Your most important activity” (53). The dream is a privileged state of mind in Ashbery’s poetry, and dream-work a primary field of poetic labor. Exercising imperious control over the dreaming subject is the most subtle and effective mode of exercising power over another. Ashbery’s surrealist alignment of the work of dreams and the work of art in effect seeks to invest the more conscious act of production with the unaccountable and unpolicable productivity of the dreaming subject. Hope, which is a more conscious, deliberate, willed, and adult human enterprise, is analogous to the structure of the dream. The juxtaposition of dreams, hopes and poems insinuates a homology between these enterprises. Through this alignment, the lack of agential guilt associated with the dream and of the child ur-person passes also into the activities of writing and hoping. The intransitive nature of dreaming is similarly transferred to its companion hopes and poems.

The dividing line between the adult and the child is the presence of critical self-awareness: this is as true of texts as of selves. The largest direct metalinguistic comment in the poem comes at the end of the first section, and takes up slightly more than two pages. Coming at the end of an important section, this intervention is very noticeable, and takes the form of what looks like an interim internal audit of how the poem has been progressing so far: “It is time now for a general understanding of / The meaning of all

this” (38). This moment of recapitulation implies that the understanding gained up to this point is far from certain, and the meaning far from clear; a poem that has to stop in its tracks to help the reader understand itself is strictly speaking engaging in self-commentary. We could take this gesture as an indication of the poem’s confession of its own difficulty, but does the poem or its speaking persona—or indeed the poet himself—have privileged access to meanings and understanding? Or is this move merely a result of the poem itself having no extra purchase over its hoard of sense than its reader? Does the poem really have what it takes to make this promise at all? Or is this part of the poem’s way of dramatizing and explicitly thematizing its meaning-making practices? Clearly, difficulty does not go away when help is promised, and promissory notes are only props when they enter the realm of art. This can never be a pipe.

In the rhetoric of difficulty, explanations are not necessarily explanatory. Their hermeneutic values are not any different from what they purport to explain. The next move in the passage we are looking at reads: “The meaning of Helga, importance of the setting, etc.” (38). The bearers of proper nouns do not, strictly speaking, have ‘meanings.’ But a character in a novel might have a symbolic meaning. Helga Crane is the socially dissatisfied mulatto, for example. The Helga here comes with the mystique of an individual person, though of course, she too is only a ‘character’ or a proper name. Ashbery here indicates the paradox of realism, whose dream of complete description is essentially unrealizable:

Isn’t this a death-trap, wanting to put too much in
So the floor sags, as under the weight of a piano, or a piano-legged girl
And the whole house of cards comes dinning down around one’s ears! (38)

The soft version of realism has to accept large omissions in order to stay finite and be

accessible to the kinds of finite beings we are. This is one of the sources, we might notice, of difficulty, the “leaving-out business” that Ashbery will later elaborate in *Three Poems*.⁴⁷ But the speaker is not ready to discuss the problem, though “[o]n it hinges the very importance of what’s novel / Or autocratic, or dense or silly” (39). The punning and homonymic ‘novel’ foregrounds the problems of the realistic novel here. It is through omissions and negations that identity is constructed, but identity itself is beyond full explanation; and explanation is too dear for completion: “I am not ready / To line phrases with the costly stuff of explanation, and shall not, / Will not do so for the moment” (39).

The one helpful explanation we do receive is that “the carnivorous / Way of these lines is to devour their own nature, leaving / Nothing but a bitter impression of absence, which as we know involves presence, but still” (39). The metaphysics of absence, activated here through the metaphor of Dionysiac homophagy and uroboric autophagy, supports an essentially autotelic mode of artistic being. The wholesale or retail extraction of words from other books that was so prominent a compositional feature of “Europe,” and the periodic insertion of items from *Three Hundred Things a Bright Boy Can Do* here, suggest a self-conception that is divided among heterogeneous counterparts, so that the poem itself is neither a self-sufficient artifact nor a totally subordinate composite or extract, but exists in an ontological space that is neither fiction nor fact, and is neither existent nor non-existent. Its relation to its own parts also reproduces this uncertainty:

This, thus is a portion of the subject of this poem

⁴⁷ “The New Spirit” from *Three Poems* famously begins: “I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer, way” (*The Moorings of Starting Out* 309).

Which is in the form of falling snow:
That is, the individual flakes are not essential to the
importance of the whole's becoming so much of a truism
That their importance is again called in question, to be
denied further out, and again and again like this. (39)

Neither the importance of the individual snow flake, nor the importance of the whole represented by the storm that sponsors that flake, describes this state of being. The rhythm of a continuous series of oscillations between the 'abstract' and the 'positive,' with a progressive concentration of the abstract, is a more likely ontological station: "But the rhythm of the series of repeated jumps, from / abstract into positive and back to a slightly less / diluted abstract. // Mild effects are the result" (39). Parts and wholes do not occupy definite or unchanging positions in the resulting work of art. This middle ground of being is exploratory and speculative rather than definite and final.

But the individual flakes—much too frequently to support this uncertainty, however—activate modes of being that are not just problematic but do not seem to be aware of this program or its critical quotient. The problem here is ethical indecisiveness: what then prevents the poem from espousing the necessity of the Holocaust, for example, or adducing arguments to show it didn't happen at all? What is the nature of the choice here exercised? It is the—as this aesthetic correctly notices—definiteness of identity that has authoritarian, procrustean normativeness as part of its very condition of being, and it is precisely the seeming givenness and naturalness of identity that is the source of its inhuman power and irresistibility. Romantic glorifications of childhood are as dangerous as McCarthyite (or Maoist, or Stalinist—this series is surely endless in our time?) purges because both privilege a-historical essences. Both appeal to fact, nature and plain common sense. There are no immutable essences, only historic possibilities, and if

we understand Ashbery's aesthetic as saying this, then its promotion of choice as aleatory is too simplistic, and its awareness of history as present choices is dim indeed. The diminution of what may be called critical spaces—not just for disagreement, but also for dialogic constructivism—here then must be counted a lapse of attention. The trouble with “plain old-fashioned cause-and-effect” and “romantic impressions of the trees, the sky” (39) is that they claim suave universality, and yet generate too many exceptions to be truly universal. That the poem perceives this is clear from the way the persona expresses solidarity with corrective measures, but opts out of the actual execution: “I am fascinated / Though by the urge to get out of it all, by going / Further in and correcting the whole mismanaged mess. / But I'm afraid I'll / Be of no help to you. Good-bye” (40).

The View from the Balloon

The last part of this section, which also concludes the first part of the poem, is an extended conceit that identifies the poet with a floating balloon—whose point of view is an elevated one, but is also one from a grossly inflated hot-air station and elevation. The drifting life of the poet contrasts with the life of ordinary people, full of labor and commonplace sublimities. The poet appears to them with one dimension less than themselves, so that he “seems to be wearing but / Half a coat, viewed from one side” (40). The vision of ordinary folk is literal, and when they see the poet with half a coat, it is the retinal truth that they perceive. But this lack of solidity inspires “the disgust of [the] honest folk / Returning from chores, the milk frozen, the pump heaped high / with a chapeau of snow” (40). Poetry makes nothing happen, it would seem, and is in need of special legitimization. But it is in this situation of ontological interrogation and

uncertainty, the poem continues, that “[the poet] is best, / Face to face with the unsmiling alternatives of his nerve-wracking existence” (40-41). It is possible that this is ironic, but there seems to be little possibility of that, especially since it is the dilemma of choice that provides the contexts for the poet’s vocation here, and it is hard to think of this as ironized into its opposite.

The last lines of this concluding section place the poet in a position of animal prostration, yet credit him with fundamental knowledge:

Placed squarely in front of his dilemma, on all fours before the
lamentable spectacle of the unknown.
Yet knowing where men **are** coming from. It is this, to hold the
candle up to the album. (41)

These lines take us back, both historically and in argument, to the primal scene of artistic production, and the supremely humanist figure of the Renaissance artist occupies the foreground here. The squared canvas, onto which figures are transferred from sketchbook album entries in studio candlelight, far away from the originals, becomes the animated stage on which the melodrama of human existence is performed. The canvas contains the vanishing point, but its figures continue, through realistic articulations aided by perspectival notations, right beyond the surface of the canvas itself, into the world from which men and women and things are drawn there. Realism here recreates the pathos of arrival, and it is the sketchbook album that mediates this arrival by candlelight. The unknown here is the world of contingency and mutability that is invisible in the final picture, but is always present from beyond the canvas and historical time through the present viewer. This world, which is the common, everyday world of our ordinary existence, thus enters art through its sketchy principals. The subordination of poet to album indicated in the phrase ‘hold the candle up to’ is part of the deflationary tactic that

denotes the active presence of irony in this poem. The self-flagellatory mode however, also comes with the disgust associated with pain, so that the reader is called upon to adopt the stance of the guilty in reading this apologia. The Eliotic casting of the poet as the person who suffers is, for all the support extended to the cause of uncertainty, a relic from a humanist past. Viewed from this perspective, the lamentable spectacle of the unknown that constitutes the poet's dilemma reduces to a melodrama of suffering and pain lamentably unrelieved by the discipline of hope.

Unlike the ironized Modernist speaker, the speaker in Ashbery's poetry seeks to be neither impersonal and objective nor consistently intimate: it therefore creates a recognizable speaking voice while reserving the option to alter at will. Inasmuch as Ashbery's poetry is difficult, it remains inhospitable to current conceptions of the human. Yet this anti-humanist payload remains qualified by an insecurity about the ethical validity of such a stance, and worries about the possible impudence of demanding labor for an activity that has been forced to describe itself in terms of idleness and marginality. Suspicion towards its own affinity to play, through which art has been liberated from social responsibility but been made vulnerable to nonage, makes Ashbery's poetry wary of pursuing the utopian and anti-humanist potential of its difficult strategies. Instead, the poem often has to fall back upon the pathos of traditional descriptions of the human condition, its vulnerability and helplessness, and upon the figure of the poet as the passive and tragic spectator and sufferer of violence. In its attempt to exculpate itself from complicity with power as well as from moral indifference, this poetry thus tends to consent to forms of certainty that stand in stark contrast to its difficulty.

If poetic difficulty is an invitation voluntarily to undertake suffering—even if only

as discomfort and confusion—then difficult poetry occupies an ambiguous moral position. This is an issue that disturbs much of John Ashbery's 'difficult' output. The difficulty is not as intense and daunting as some of the more extreme varieties; it is a difficulty that a wide readership has come to tolerate and even enjoy. His difficulty is usually not syntactical or lexical, but inheres in the persistent absence of context and the way in which personal confessions or fictional stories are begun in traditional modes and generate, without satisfying, the desire for closure and private utterance. The relaxed, not particularly dense tone of the writing makes this mysteriousness all the more confusing, and revelations, when they happen, are formal rather than semantic: the discovery that the poem is a sestina or a pantoum, for instance, serves as a reminder that order and coherence mostly derive from artifice. The playfulness and humor of Ashbery's poetry, combined with his formal dexterity, are often sufficient to make the reader ignore the immense contextual vacuum that locks these performances into a paradigm of concealment. It has therefore become increasingly possible to say that Ashbery is not difficult at all, and that the excesses of *The Tennis Court Oath* constitute a moment of temporary analytic violence as a prelude to a more significant synthesis, as Ashbery himself has repeatedly suggested. The melancholy that pervades the poetry and the constantly revisited pathos of the helplessness of childhood divert the possible suffering that the text might inflict on the reader to the body of the poem itself and its personae, who are the first victims of the difficulties of the Ashbery poem. The gentle superficiality of these poems, albeit characteristically 'postmodern,' is a deliberate effect achieved by repeatedly emphasizing the depths that supposedly remain untouched, as though it is reticence and not denial that keeps the comforting dream unbroken.

CHAPTER 3

TOUGH LOVE: READING J.H. PRYNNE

What if a poem expresses no desire for a reader? To recall John Wilkinson's description of the enigmatic poem: "The reader knows such a poem surpasses all his or her ingenuity. It does not need its readers; its readers need the poem" (Chapter 1, 32). Though the vulnerability of the work of art—the touching exhibitionism it commits to as it enters the marketplace of goods and stands still to be measured, evaluated, and (hopefully) accepted—has defined its modern existence, it has also always sought something beyond communicating with its audience. The desire for secrecy, freedom, privilege, or moral rectitude might explain the poem's standoffish behaviour, as I have pointed out in my introductory chapter. This aloofness might not be just elitism, however. The communicative act implies division: there is a speaker and a listener, both bound by the entire range of communicative conventions and social niceties in force at that historical moment, and locked into roles that fall into the order established by language. Accepting this communicative model of the work of art implies unquestioning endorsement of the subject-object dualism that has been definitive of modernity. The division, however, is itself historical, and the creative nature of the work of art makes it particularly well-equipped to consider the possibility that current metaphysical formations are not absolute but contingent, and that the subject-object divide is itself a product of specific socio-historical pressures rather than being ineluctably given. The apparent introversion of the poem is therefore not necessarily a rejection of the reader's gesture of friendship, but a rejection of the supposed abyss that such a gesture is meant temporarily

and locally to bridge. In this chapter, I will explore in some detail what it might mean to be a reader of difficult, even impossible, poetry.

The British poet J.H. Prynne has maintained a rather complex relationship with the figure of the reader. He tells fellow Cambridge poet Peter Riley: “It has mostly been my own aspiration [...] to establish relations not personally with the reader, but with the world and its layers of shifted but recognisable usage; and thereby with the reader’s own position within the world.”¹ The ambition here is immense, of course. The casual reference to “the world” implies a willingness to take on the entirety of human experience as knowledge, sensation, affect, memory, and intention in all their respective diachronic densities. The poetic of impersonality advanced here is not, however, modelled upon scientific objectivity, but rather upon an abiding stance of suspicion towards standardized notions of what it is to be human. In this sense, Prynne’s poetry is diametrically opposed to that of Ashbery, despite their shared reputation for difficulty. Prynne’s anti-humanist stance should not be confused, however, with the glorification of masculine violence and machismo characteristic of the Modernist avant-garde tradition to which his work is heavily indebted.² Marianne Morris’ critique of Prynne’s methods in terms of violence,³

¹ Quoted by Riley as an epigraph to his volume *Reader*.

² Prynne is sympathetic to Wyndham Lewis, for instance, who borrowed most of his rhetorical strategies from Futurism. “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” published in *Le Figaro* on February 20, 1909 contained a series of declarations that imagined an aesthetic of violence: “We will glorify war—the world’s only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman,” declares item nine of the Manifesto of Futurism (Marinetti 50). The same document offers definitions of art that deliberately overturn art’s Enlightenment role as the great civilizing force: “Art, in fact, can be nothing but violence, cruelty, and injustice” (Marinetti 51). Also see Roman Jakobson’s statement: “The theory of unconditioned correspondence between verse and spirit of language we replace by the theory of organized violence of poetic form over the language” (“Теория безусловного соответствия стиха духу языка, непротивления формы материалу мы противопоставляем теорию организованного насилия поэтической формы над языком” *Selected Writings* vol. 5, 15; the translation is from Senderovich 354.).

³ Violence, positively or negatively conceived, has remained one of the dominant metaphor-pools for Prynne’s difficulty. To cite a bathetic example: Former Oxford Professor of Poetry James Fenton published the following poem titled “Lyric” in 2001: “Jeremy Prynne / Jeremy Prynne / Isn’t your oeuvre

for instance, is therefore limited:

[T]he practically indecipherable late work of JH Prynne [...] has earned its bloody abstraction, [...] there are precise reasons for it, and [...] late-Prynne is drastically altered in meaning and purpose by early-Prynne, which is resplendent with cold and feral battles for and against narrative, against the utterance of the first-person singular, against any utterance not carefully pre-hewn and re-sewn into its margins of beauty and importance. [...] But I'm certain that abstraction in poetry must be balanced with its opposite, and I am no longer convinced that radicalism in poetry begins in syntactical dissonance and grammatical violence. (Morris)

Even the relatively more accessible and even luminous early work is described in terms of “cold and feral battles,” while the abstraction of the later work seems bathed in the blood of murdered grammar. The violation of syntax turns poetry into a warzone.⁴

Violence alone cannot be the chief measure of a difficult poem's sociality. It is possible, for instance, to think of difficulty as creating the necessary conditions for dismantling fundamentally violent modes of engaging with the world. In “A Gold Ring Called Reluctance,” Prynne points to the fact that unity and coherence might themselves be forms of violence: “biologic collapse is violence reversed, / like untying a knot” (*Poems* 21). The collapse of syntax, therefore, could imply a caring and careful corrective to the primal violence that precipitates lyric utterance: the separation of subject from object.

rather thynne? / Don't hit me with your rolling pynne / Jeremy / Jeremy / Jeremy Prynne” (Fenton 99). The suggestion of a lack of substance is accompanied by an accusation of accomplished or threatened violence (the rolling ‘pynne’ being not only a device for rolling out “thynne” layers of pastry but also a favored weapon in domestic disputes),³ neatly fitting together the two major charges against difficult art—that of charlatanry and of violence—into the poem's rhyme scheme. The rolling-pin metaphor recalls Prynne's treatment of pastry in “Of Sanguine Fire” from *Brass*. The poem begins with the line “Swift as a face rolled away like / pastry” and presently waxes eloquent on pie crusts: “The pastry face / takes the name Pie (crust folded / like wings over the angelic sub-/strate, all so like pasties they / hover again)” (*Poems* 175). Incidentally, the fact that ‘pastes’ are not just small pastries but also paste-on nipple-coverings for otherwise naked breasts is important for the erotic tensions set up by the poem.

⁴ Compare a similar remark by D.S. Marriott in the context of Prynne's “Of Movement towards a Natural Place”: “It is instructive [...] to see how closely Prynne, during the 1970s, followed a path of *Aletheia* (truth as unconcealment) rather than the speculative violence of the later works with their systematic destruction of all forms of speculative logic. *Wound Response* is, in my view, the lavishly understated beginning of this destruction” (“Of Movement towards a Natural Place” 34). Marriott is using an explicitly Heideggerian vocabulary, of course, so the *destruktion* is part, in a way, of the process of unconcealment and only metaphorically violent. See note 27 for Prynne's early speculations on the nature of violence; this might

Difficulty in art, unlike the difficulties that present themselves in daily living, foregrounds this sense of separation precisely because art needn't be difficult—it can mesh effortlessly with collective desires and simulate unified wholes. Yet at the same time, as I have suggested, difficult art questions the inviolability of this separation, exposing the entire pathos of the alienated human subject to the skeptical gaze. The possible untruth of difficulty—its lack of necessity and its necessary historicity—can therefore shift difficult poetry into a paradigm that overlaps only minimally, if at all, with violence. The simultaneous acknowledgement of the givenness and constructedness of the world that the artwork's attitude of difficulty undertakes can in fact be seen in terms of affection, even of love—that maudlin word that has become almost unspeakable in our times. In the pages that follow, I will argue that Prynne's difficulty foregrounds and challenges the meaning of desire both as it operates in language, and as it mediates the reader's relationship with the poem. The specific forms of need that underwrite the existence of the difficult poem and its readers will therefore be central for this chapter.

The particular bewilderment that affects Prynne's readers derives partly from the fact that the poetry does not appear to be “experimental”:⁵ what happens in the poem does not occur under special conditions, but enacts itself in a space that is open to the entire weight of human history and consciousness, and to this extent, Simon Jarvis is right

imply that even before the '70s, Prynne was open to the idea of what might be experienced as violence being in fact the correction of violence.

⁵ I use this word in the sense of something that is removed from real consequences; a trial run or a test drive. Mishaps can occur and risks do exist, but they are minimized by their highly controlled environments. Oren Izenberg offers a different but very creative definition of the term ‘experimental’ in the context of Language Poetry: “Language poets are *experimental* [...] because they treat their poems not as semantic tokens or aesthetic objects but as examples” (Izenberg 94). It appears that Izenberg associates the experimental attitude with an indifference to particularity. This might be due to the association of the term ‘experimental’ with its late-nineteenth century use by Zola in his celebrated essay on the ‘experimental’ or ‘Naturalist’ novel, in which individuals are ultimately reduced to types. The pedigree of this word in poetics goes back to Romanticism, where using this word in a positive sense was seen as part of literary and other

when he insists on Prynne's interest in the heteronomy as well as the autonomy of the poetic domain.⁶ At the same time, Prynne's poetry makes full use of the so-called autonomous or 'purely' formal aspects of poetry, and does so with such reckless abandon that the rigidity and seriousness of the final effect remain incongruous and sometimes shocking. This is probably why Charles Bernstein finds Prynne a "troubling figure" despite the fact that Bernstein has been a relentless champion of poetic difficulty.⁷ In

forms of radicalism by conservative British critics for whom the French Revolution was an irresponsible 'experiment' (Hamilton 43).

⁶ Jarvis calls attention to "the refusal of [Prynne's] work either to surrender as non-poetic the aspiration to do justice to minute particulars or to take up the sheltered but displaced ground of a relative aesthetic autonomy whence whatever is written need not be taken literally" ("Quality and the Non-Identical").

⁷ See "On Poetry, Language, Teaching: An Interview with Charles Bernstein" 58. Bernstein has commented more extensively on Cambridge poetry. Cambridge poets tend, he says, to

get bogged down in a decorous solemnity that pulls back from the "wild" sonic and formal risks sometimes gestured at, [but] there is certainly an enormous commitment, not to say devotion, evident. Still, the virtually reified rhetorical surface of the sprung lyric — "the voice belongs in the words and not to a speaker", in J.H. Prynne's words — can seem more a house style than a ticket to a "true" poetry that "wings the heart", more a "vehement theology of the Word" than a participatory democracy of language. Isn't the jeopardy, indeed, "false assuagement", clinging to the vestiges of the old music as if it were the only music, the old truths as if they were the only truths? ("Leaking the Truth: British Poetry in the 90s")

Indeed, the reticence of Prynne's poetry to accept unconditionally utopias of "participatory democracy" through a penitent rejection of all that is old and therefore to be discarded (Prynne's early poetry has rather sentimental things to say about rubbish and dust and other entities aged beyond recognition) can appear dubious. Earlier in the same essay, Bernstein remarks even more sternly on the "patrician decorum and Oxbridge authoritativeness that barely covers over the thematic renunciation of these values." While it is easy to read this attitude as a sign of the general backwardness of a culture rooted in an 800-year-old university town, my argument—as it should be obvious—is that this poetry at its best thrives in the contradictions generated by "sonic and formal risks" being used not just in the exclusive interests of an unconditioned and liberating wildness, but equally for a solemn and even desperate articulation of the poem's historical locations. Bernstein's own gruesome cheerfulness, for instance, in "Girly Man" while confronting the war in Iraq, and Barrett Watten's cautious approach to "sonic and formal risks" in *Bad History* (dealing with the first Gulf War) might indicate that Language Poetry's formal insights have not really succeeded in accosting the necessarily historical content of language. It must be added that Prynne's critique of Language Poetry (which might make Bernstein's comment an oblique rebuttal and counter-attack) has been far more devastating; his famous "Letter to Steve McCaffery" will be briefly discussed in Chapter 5. Bernstein's position is of course not representative of all of Language Poetry, though most members have tended to distance themselves from Prynne in one way or the other. Here is Silliman blogging on Prynne:

Prynne's sympathies are not that far from my own & [...] he is decidedly a poet of the ear, related in this aspect to such writers as Duncan, Creeley, Olson or Dorn. Reading him, you cannot doubt that you are in the presence of man [sic] who knows exactly what he is about & is after in his poetry. The intelligence is palpable. This is why Prynne, for me, is such a good example [of how Silliman is unable to "hear" much of British poetry]. Everything about his work tells me that I should love it unreservedly, but I spend so much time scrunching my nose & furrowing my brow

Prynne, difficulty is not the access to freedom that it is for most programmatically difficult poetry, but is riven by the same divisions that provoke it into being. The unresolved tension between freedom and unfreedom that is definitive of Prynne's poetry is closely related to a thematic of intention and affinity, and linked formally to the syntactic and contingent difficulties of poetic form. Before I explore the poetry in some detail, it is necessary at the very outset to clarify Prynne's own explicit statements about difficulty. These statements will not be taken as definitive of how readers might experience difficulty or even of the range of Prynne's poetic practice, but will be used to articulate a theoretical position that can provide a convenient starting point for the discussions of poems that follow.

J.H. Prynne on Difficulty

Prynne is perhaps the only poet who developed and published a theory of poetic difficulty before officially embarking on a career as a difficult poet. Though the essay "Resistance and Difficulty"⁸ is early and rather schematic, it is a useful point of entry into the preliminary stages of Prynne's explicit thinking on difficulty.⁹ "Resistance and Difficulty" was published in the little magazine *Prospect* in 1961, one year before the

as I read it that I wonder sometimes at what level he & I are practicing the same language.
(*Silliman's Blog*, Friday, December 13, 2002)

⁸ The best discussion of the essay to date can be found in chapter 5 of D.S. Marriott's unpublished PhD dissertation "An Introduction to the Poetry of J.H. Prynne (1962-77)," particularly pages 124-140. Part of this chapter was published in the journal *Parataxis* under the title "Contemporary British Poetry and Resistance: Reading J.H. Prynne."

⁹ D.S. Marriott offers a valuable caveat in this regard. Pointing to the fact that the essay originated from Prynne's early engagement with the thought of Donald Davie and Charles Tomlinson, whose notions of resistance Prynne would discard soon after writing "Resistance and Difficulty" and *Force of Circumstance* (1962), Marriott suggests that it would be imprudent to place too great an emphasis on this essay in explicating Prynne's entire corpus ("An Introduction to the Poetry of J.H. Prynne" 118).

publication of his first book of poetry, *Force of Circumstance*, and is in fact his first published piece of writing. Unlike George Steiner, who generates a taxonomy of poetic difficulty (a full seventeen years later), Prynne undertakes a more generalized ontology of difficulty and the related concept of resistance. At this early stage in Prynne's thinking about poetry, it becomes important to imagine modes of representation that do not obviate the need for an objective reality independent of representations. He argues therefore that 'resistance' is the most persuasive indicator of the presence of substance, of 'things,'¹⁰ independent of the concepts and categories of consciousness. Drawing explicitly and heavily on the phenomenological tradition,¹¹ he proposes that "[T]he concept of resistance may provide an alternative criterion of intelligibility; one which does not undermine the 'presence, actuality and existence' of an object or person, but which makes accessible the fact of its existence without impairing its status as a substantial, independent entity" (27). Difficulty, on the other hand, is the subjective experience generated by an encounter with resistance: "It is as if the senses reported to my mind the presence of resistance outside me by means of the internal sensation of difficulty" (28).

¹⁰ For a helpful overview of the distinction between 'thing' and 'object,' see Bill Brown's "Thing Theory": We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A *thing*, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (4)

Brown's description of the difference between 'object' and 'thing', which is heavily indebted to Heidegger's discussion of 'equipment' in *Being and Time*, parallels Prynne's distinction between difficulty and resistance; both are modeled on Kant's phenomenon-noumenon distinction. It is also useful to compare Heidegger's concept of things as characterized by "standing against" (*Gegenstehen*) with Prynne's concept of "resistance" (*What Is a Thing?* 223).

¹¹ According to D.S. Marriott, Prynne's essay has been heavily influenced by John Wild's 1959 essay "Contemporary Phenomenology and the Problem of Existence" ("Introduction" 133-36). Keston Sutherland argues that the primary source for the essay's references to phenomenology is another 1959 text, Herbert Spiegelberg's *The Phenomenological Movement* ("J.H. Prynne and Philology" 110).

Hence we can infer that difficulty is cognitively prior to resistance, but resistance is ontologically prior to difficulty.

The affirmation of “substantial, [mind-]independent entities” clearly indicates Prynne’s resistance to absolutist versions of constructivism, and his preference for a qualified constructivism in the line of Kant. In Kant and later on in Heidegger, Being remains autonomous only to the extent that it is inaccessible to a continuously expanding and acquisitive interiority. Experience at best constructs parallel structures analogous to an ‘outside’ reality, whose only index is difficulty. The experience of limits and of finitude—the internal experience of difficulty, in other words—therefore affirms the noumenal world and at the same time leaves it unthought and unthinkable. However, the aspect of semblance in Prynne’s account of the aesthesis of difficulty—“It is *as if* the senses reported...” —places it firmly within the realm of analogy rather than of truth-discourses. Accounts of sensory experience constituted through language are themselves metaphors for the actualities they intend, and should only be taken as such. The projective movement of language as construct is itself the imperial expansion of reason, and its simultaneously creative and destructive movement, eloquently expressed in the dialectical aporias of irony, is a sign of as well as a response to its own limits. Hence Prynne’s own phenomenology of difficulty and resistance, one could argue, is an ironic performance of the impossible—or the sublime—task of theorising Being.

The special significance of poetic difficulty, as opposed to other forms of difficulty, derives from its affiliation not with language but through its status as a product of the creative imagination:

Resistance [...] is in an inescapable sense *given*, found to exist, and may not be fabricated or willed into being—like difficulty—to meet the continuing demand

for palpable texture of human affairs. And this priority of givenness over purposiveness seems to be a distinguishing feature of the creative imagination alone of the various capacities of man—this unfathomable ability to give sustenance to what is needed but not simply wanted, to offer both the difficulty of contrivance and also a profound assurance that this difficulty corresponds to genuine resistance in the larger context of the outside world. (30)

The ability of the creative imagination to respond to need, rather than mere want—which is vulnerable to ideology and wilful assertions of selfhood—makes it conversant with structures of dependence in the world that are not beholden to humanly legislated dependencies.¹² The constitutive nature of the imagination consists in its ability to create without the will to possess: “It is the imagination’s peculiar function to admit, draw sustenance from, and celebrate the ontological priority of this outside world, by creating entities which subsequently become a part of the world, an addition to it” (30). The implication here is that the products of the imagination do not affirm the acquisitive interiority of the ‘cogito’—they are not directed towards the private consumption of a rational self that is eager for its own representations—but perform a genuine overture towards the outside as the posited habitation of the other.

Thus for the early Prynne, the work of art is a possible solution for radical ontological uncertainty and its concomitant solipsism. In the case of the work of art, we know that there is an independent source of sensory experience for the simple reason that we made it and then placed it *there*, within the order of things as “an addition to” the world, so that it can become an object of our attention. And unlike other objects of

¹² Elsewhere, Prynne says: “[W]hat they wanted was *who they were*, this last term not a consequent structure but the major determinative of place, range, social attachment and so on” (Letter to Peter Riley, 1 March 1967; *The English Intelligencer* Series 2, Issue 1 (April 1967): p. 284). For a useful comparison of the conceptualization of ‘need’ in Prynne and Adorno, see Sutherland’s “J.H. Prynne and Philology” 61-68. Sutherland rightly concludes that unlike Adorno, Prynne believes that there are indeed authentic and ‘real’ needs as opposed to ideologically constructed ones: “Our need of dignity is unalterably a true need, regardless of how the experience of both truth and needing is mediated by social realities beyond our power to change or even fully to apprehend” (“J.H. Prynne and Philology” 68).

human labor meant for use, works of art are not seamless extensions of our own purposes and desires—art demands attention, and declares itself an autonomous source of experience. It therefore respects both the substance as well as the processes that make it intelligible:

Hence the tensions between metre and rhythm, between credibility and dramatic cogency, in fact the stringencies of artifice and discipline generally which constitute the dimensions within which the imagination is realised and becomes intelligible, embody both the process and its difficulties, and the resistance proper to its substance. (30)

Within poetry, whose substance is language, Prynne finds that the ordering of words lends itself to poetic manipulations and can thus produce constructed, ‘fabricated’ difficulties. But the phonic and etymological aspects of language (and to this we may also add the orthographic aspect) present themselves as given rather than made, since they are riveted to history and to their material properties. These therefore supply the necessary resistance that affirms the dense presence of wrought language as thing rather than mere instrument.

What is rarely pointed out in discussions of this essay, including D.S. Marriott’s extended and exemplary analysis,¹³ is that it is as much a critique of difficult poetry as it is an explanation of it. Throughout the essay, it is ‘resistance’ that is privileged due to its givenness, whereas difficulty can be fabricated, as it usually is in poetry. To this extent, difficulty is open to motive and therefore to critique. Prynne sees that within a purely constructivist model, difficulty would become a means of merely affirming the lone reality of the mind rather than presenting any radical encounter with otherness: “If the subject allows the external world only sufficient objective reality for the major dimensions of human living to be set up, then all that can be discovered in it is difficulty. Sooner or

later the viciousness of this position becomes evident, because once it has finally been adopted it cannot admit the existence of contingent facts or other beings” (29). Under these circumstances, difficulty can become a dialectical tool generated to extend the domain of the mind rather than to demarcate the limits of the mind, and it is a testament to Prynne’s early and continuing commitment to a radical dualism that he refuses to accept otherness as simply a means to affirm the cogito, as in the Hegelian dialectic or its expression in Orientalist attitudes. Difficulty’s genuinely cognitive value—as opposed to its methodological value—for Prynne rests in its affiliation with the creative imagination, through which the mind is found extending its creativity into the order of things, amongst which its produce remains. Prynne’s emphasis on need, which arises from necessity and not from desire for that which already exists (which would be want), suggests that the imagination is capable of a unique and genuine movement from a real interiority to a real exteriority.

There is an inherent limitation to Prynne’s model, which I believe he overcomes in his subsequent thinking. In “Resistance and Difficulty,” he is inattentive to the following fact: that which resists can also yield, and this must be an essential part of the freedom one must imagine for the world. Without this freedom, resistance would be entirely beyond any form of cognition, intellectual or intuitive. The rock must present itself as resistant to the touch, and yet the texture and shape of its resistance are still available to the sensitive fingers, which can distinguish between newly-broken granite, porous laterite and sea-polished flint.¹⁴ Resistance cannot manifest itself in unadulterated forms, which is why the world seems always willing to wriggle into imaginary and

¹³ See footnotes 8 and 9.

imaginative accounts of its being. Resistance is therefore not the only sign by which the world communicates its separateness: the ease with which arbitrary rules can elicit conformity from the world in what seems to be unmotivated mimesis is perhaps the strongest indication of a conscious otherness. Folk etymology is premised upon the expectation that words must be related to the world: this expectation is based on the conception of a world as an entity that has intentional reactions to human intentions, so that a dualism exists, but it is unstable in the sense that the world is also frequently willing to co-operate with human desire. This very co-operation is sometimes the startling signal of otherness: the pleasure with which Surrealists have noted the genuinely ‘poetic’ results of chance operations and the sculptural perfections of driftwood imply a temporary convergence of subjective and objective worlds. The simple dualism of resistance and difficulty is therefore not entirely viable, in this sense.

In the decade that followed, Prynne continuously refined his conception of “want” and “need,” as well as the notion of “motive,” which shares with them a comparable intentional structure based on a deliberate setting forth into the domain of the other. He rearticulates resistance primarily in terms of a reciprocity between human desire and the world. One of the most eloquent and uncharacteristically rhapsodic descriptions of what Prynne perceives as the inextricability of desire and reality can be found in his 1971 lecture on Olson’s *Maximus IV V VI*:

I mean, think of the extraordinary unlikelihood of what such a thing like Stonehenge or Avebury were built to predict. They never thought they would work. Oh, never. I mean, they were chance shots. Like, sooner or later it must come round again, and it must come round again because it was wanted: and if it was wanted, it would come. There is this immense controversy now about how they knew over those immense periods of time that there were cyclic repetitions

¹⁴ Compare Catherine Belsey: “The world may be encountered as resistance, but it cannot be known outside the systems of differences which define it” (684).

in the movement of heavenly bodies. They didn't know. They just wanted it. That's how it happened.

And the Olson poem also wants it. And if you read it, and if you hear it, then you also want it. Then you can also have the particular condition of transpiring through the noble arc, from the land to the shore, from the shore to the sea, from the sea to the ocean, from the ocean to the void, from the void to the horizontal curve, which is love. ("On *Maximus IV V VP*")

The effortless settlement of the known cosmos into human designs and designations is then not merely an effect of solipsism or ideological homogeneity, but an outcome of the operation of a desire that bridges the known and the unknown.¹⁵ The reader must want connections even if she cannot know that they exist, and the wanting generates modes of coherence that are not devoid of empirical reality. While the difficulty of poetry has often been construed as a violent attack on the unsuspecting and peaceable reader, this approach to the imagination permits difficulty to become an occasion for testing the limits and resilience of the creative ligatures between human desire and the inhuman world. The labor of difficulty is thus, quite literally for Prynne, the labor of love, and as such the closest we can get—if Marcuse is to be believed—to unalienated labor.

Prynne makes another crucial qualification to the problem of poetic difficulty through his discussion of obscurity and its relationship to genre.¹⁶ Here, he speaks of

¹⁵ This is also why Prynne goes to great lengths to refute Saussure's theory of the arbitrariness of signs in the 1983 lecture series *Stars, Tigers and the Shape of Words*, and at the same time endorses Saussure's tangential interest in anagrams in a more recent lecture, "Mental Ears and Poetic Work" (152 n. 36). For a very helpful introduction to Saussure's work on anagrams, see Jonathan Culler's *Ferdinand de Saussure* 123-133. Unlike Culler, however, Prynne would probably argue that there are specific and privileged anagrammatic formations that crystallize through socio-historical pressures. See Wunderli for a more recent overview of the successes and failures of Saussure's investigations in this area.

¹⁶ It is not entirely clear if his shift to the term 'obscurity' is motivated by Prynne's much later clarification of the difference between 'difficulty' and 'obscurity.' He makes the distinction in the Keynote Speech given at the First Conference of English-Poetry Studies in China (2008):

It is useful to distinguish "difficult" from "obscure". When poetry is *obscure* this is chiefly because information necessary for comprehension is not part of the reader's knowledge. The missing information may be specific (a personal name, say, or some tacit allusion), or general (an aspect of religious belief, say); and finding out this information may dispel much of the obscurity. When poetry is *difficult* this is more likely because the language and structure of its presentation are unusually cross-linked or fragmented, or dense with ideas and response-patterns that challenge the

obscurity and complexity as capable of succeeding in lyric poetry, but not in epic poetry: “The obscure lyric you can get a kind of touch to the spinal column from. There is a thrill you can get from a certain kind of dense suggestive cheesecake kind of lyric language. But the obscure epic, oh, —and there are obscure epics, I mean, well, obscure small epics anyway. The obscure large ones, I mean, just perish. [...] So, it must be clear. It must be simple” (“On *Maximus IV, V, VP*”).¹⁷ The lyric, Prynne says, cannot capture the totality of things; it is a highly localized performance, concerned with parts alone, and is therefore susceptible to complexity. Yet the distinction between lyric and epic is itself complex, for Prynne means by ‘simple’ a primal singularity rather than ease of access: “The universe is simple. Simple in a technical sense: that’s to say, the universe is simple. Any part of the universe is complex. In fact, there are only two things in the universe which are simple, and one of them is the universe taken as a whole; and the other is its language, because its language is its capacity for love.” The capaciousness of the epic, its overload of information, is precisely what makes it necessarily simple, because it achieves an inclusive wholeness and singularity: a realization of ‘love’ in Empedocles’ sense.¹⁸ The complexity of the lyric derives from its concern with the particular. This makes totality in the lyric accessible only through the transpositions of metaphor, which allows for the scale to be shifted to its maximal enlargement while remaining embedded in the world as a specific point. The yearning for the condition of wholeness, while being bound by definition to the particular, thus defines the lyric. This condition is dramatized in Prynne’s “Lashed to the Mast,” which describes the perilous voyage that the lyric, despite its limited reach,

reader’s powers of recognition. In such cases, extra information may not give much help. (“Difficulties in the Translation of ‘Difficult’ Poems” 160)

¹⁷ Prynne provides a partial quotation of Aristotle here, who says in *Poetics* 24: “It must be simple [*haplōs*], or complex [*peplegmenen*], or ethical [*ethikēn*], or pathetic [*pathetikēn*].” (Morrissey).

must undertake, because “the whole need is a due thing” (*Poems* 49). If Prynne’s poetry is to be considered lyric poetry, as it usually is,¹⁹ then it is necessary to concede that he expands the lyric to epic proportions, endowing the work with an inclusiveness that functions through suggestion and implicature, vagueness and indeterminacy, and permits the whole to be recognized—though not apprehended—as the object of its desiring language. It is therefore not surprising that the opening lines of *Poems* raises the problem of difficulty in these terms: “The whole thing it is, the difficult / matter: to shrink the confines/ down” (10).

Yet this is not to suggest that Prynne shifts to a purely Hegelian dialectic involving the reconciliation of duality in favor of unity, which turns resistance into an inevitable prelude to accommodation as synthesis. This is despite the fact that Prynne liberally and approvingly uses the term ‘dialectic’ in his theoretical writings, including recent essays like “A Quick Riposte” (25), “Mental Ears and Poetic Work” (138, 140, 141, 142) and “Poetic Thought” (597, 599, and n.6). To reconcile this contradiction, it would be useful to consider Prynne’s version of the dialectic through another favored term: irony.²⁰ In his discussion of the figure in his “Letter to Steve McCaffery,” Prynne considers the “bicameralism” of irony indispensable for modes of writing that seek to keep critique alive without anchoring it in the notion of the transcendental subject (43).

¹⁸ Empedocles 166.

¹⁹ Reeve and Kerridge provide an extensive discussion of Prynne’s lyricism (37-105). See Butler 68-114 for a recent reading of Prynne’s postmodern lyric.

²⁰ Irony is closely related to the dialectic. For example, Anne Mellor finds it necessary to distinguish between the play of opposites in both irony and the dialectic; irony, she points out, is not oriented towards any definite resolution: “Hegel’s dialectic is progressive and transcendental. The thesis generates its antithesis, which is then reconciled with the thesis in a higher synthesis. [...] In contrast, Schlegel’s dialectic allows for no genuine resolution or synthesis. The thesis and antithesis remain always in contradiction: being or system can never be united with becoming or chaos” (Mellor 11-12). Kevin Nolan has a somewhat different explanation for Prynne’s rejection of Hegel while retaining the notion of the dialectic: for him, Prynne’s “disagreement [with Hegel] would rather seem to hinge on the uses of dialectical

His frequent references to “the dialectic” might appear problematic, even dated, because in its Hegelian and Marxist articulations, it is—unlike irony—a triadic movement, with the “synthetic” moment representing a stable negation of both thesis and antithesis. A poetic based on a dialectical model of representation must necessarily confront the charge of seeking moments of stability that will harmonize tensions, and ultimately gather up all differences and disjunctions into an all-embracing totality. Needless to say, this is an embarrassing belief for a contemporary ‘avant-garde’ poet. Since “dialectic” is a term that Prynne repeatedly uses in his metapoetic work, it is important to clarify its numerical value in Prynne: in other words, to check whether it is an antagonistic dualism or a tripled unity. In his letter to Steve McCaffery, he is unequivocal about his interpretation of the dialectic as an unresolved dualism closely aligned with irony:

I'd have to contest the disqualification of dialectic by reference to an implied trivalent synthesis, since activation of consciousness by the contraventions of attention precisely will not come to stable focus between cynical expedient and mortified division, at least as I understand the use of a term like irony as intrinsically unhyposstatic and incapable of self-support. (43)

There is no stable middle ground where contradictory movements can be reconciled: both irony and dialectic are thus not geared towards resolution, but generate zones of being and knowledge for which unresolved tensions are the very condition of possibility.²¹

The source for this ironic-paradoxical version of the dialectic is not really Adorno, and this is despite the fact that Prynne frequently sounds like him (most of my quotations

reasoning within the context of a rationalist idealism, in which the ‘return’ of the human subject to itself takes place by means of an initial *separation* from nature” (“Capital Calves”).

²¹ Prynne reiterates this version of the dialectic, as well as its relationship to irony, more briefly in “Poetic Thought”: “Dialectics [...] is the working encounter with contradiction in the very substance of object-reality and the obduracy of thought; irony not as an optional tone of voice but as marker for intrinsic anomaly” (597).

in Chapter 4 are examples). The ratification of this idiosyncratic, resolutely dualistic notion derives partly from the early theoretical work of Mao. Mao himself derives his version of the dialectic partly from Chinese and Japanese philosophy, partly from Lenin and Stalin, and partly from having to cope with the inapplicability of the Marxist-Hegelian teleology to Chinese Communism.²² The lectures “On Practice” and “On Contradiction”—Prynne cites the latter in his most recent work, *Kazuo Dreamboats* (2011),²³ and also refers approvingly to Mao’s interpretation of the dialectic in recent lectures²⁴—constitute, along with some later comments, Mao’s contribution to thinking on the dialectic. What is generally considered unique to Mao is his complete rejection of the third term of the dialectic, reinterpreting it instead as a proliferation of local contradictions. The only resolution possible is the antithesis destroying the thesis, setting itself up as the new thesis; there is no synthesis whatsoever. In a much later interview, Mao would explicitly reject the Hegelian notion of “the negation of the negation” or the synthesis as entirely unrealistic;²⁵ he consistently privileges the antithesis, which irreversibly demolishes that which it reacts against. Mao’s theories are no doubt philosophically unsophisticated compared to the Hegelian and Marxist texts,²⁶ but he nevertheless develops a more intransigent and less deterministic version of contradiction

²² See Liu 78-83.

²³ On page 8, he quotes from Mao’s “On Contradiction”; he cites the text in the “Reference Cues” at the end of the volume.

²⁴ See “Poetic Thought” (60). Also see “Introduction to Prynne’s Poems in Chinese” by Prynne and Sutherland, where Prynne says:

[T]here’s no doubt that my thinking about the question of dialectic in relation to a curriculum was strongly influenced by Mao Ze-dong’s notions concerning the structure and programme for a revolutionary practice. And I read all of Mao Ze-dong’s early essays about contradiction as directly instructive to my sense about the notion of a curriculum, and the notion of teaching and learning in a language to students whose language was not the one that I had myself. (205)

²⁵ “There is no such thing as the negation of the negation” (Mao 181).

²⁶ In responses to the following statement by Mao in the 1957 lecture “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People,” Žižek remarks that Mao “regresses here to primitive pagan wisdom”:

through his own experience of organizing and sustaining (or not) a revolution. Prynne's Maoist dialectic is thus based on dualistic and unrelentingly contradictory movement that cannot be contained through stasis or achieved entelechy; its inhospitability to resolution links it closely to Romantic irony.

On the one hand, Prynne is committed to a material universe that cannot be reduced to ideas, and at the same time, as his remarks on Olson as well as his frequent and not always ironic references to love in his early poetry indicate, he is open to the possibility of coherence through love. Difficulty is located in the midst of this struggle between unity and particularity, between the opposing necessities of coherence and incoherence, simplicity and complexity. But as Prynne's interest in categories such as "need" and "want" indicates, "love" is not merely the impersonal cosmic force described by Empedocles; it also represents affinities, desires, and wants of human actors and communities. The "horizontal curve, which is love" is a linguistic condition, since language is the world's "capacity for love" (see previous quotations). This extraordinary linkage—extraordinary for a supposedly Postmodern poet—of love, language, and reader will in some ways ground my reading of Prynne's difficulty.²⁷

"One thing destroys another, things emerge, develop, and are destroyed, everywhere is like this [sic]. If things are not destroyed by others, then they destroy themselves" (Žižek 26-27; Mao 182).

²⁷ These unusual remarks have not received significant scholarly attention. Birgitta Johansson, in what is still the only published monograph devoted entirely to Prynne, provides a subsection titled "The Curvature of Love" in *The Engineering of Being* (Johansson 88-94), in which these statements are analysed in terms of Prynne's interest in Heidegger. Johansson rightly observes that "A central issue in [Prynne's] project is to examine whether *Da-sein* or the condition of being has been given the possibility to exist in a symbiosis with the various elements in the Cosmos—an aim that has already been formulated and focused on by Heidegger" (Johansson 89). But she goes no farther, and does not attempt, for instance, to connect this project with Heidegger's discussion of 'care' in *Being and Time*. James Keery adds to this discussion by pointing out that the references to curvature function as "a trope of the Einsteinian theory of the 'curvature' of space-time" ("Jacob's Ladder" and the Levels of Artifice"). The only other discussion of the essay can be found in Butler's unpublished dissertation, pp. 72-73. The brief analysis, however, is rather inadequate and at some points seems to misinterpret Prynne. The word 'love' is passed over in silence here, and even Keston Sutherland, who does treat Prynne's use of the word 'love' in some detail, focuses on the word in the context of a love of knowledge, rather than as a standalone concept. In fact, he does

The most immediate inspiration for Prynne's interpretation of the word is almost certainly Pound and his interest in the troubadours and Cavalcanti. Prynne attempted his own translation of Cavalcanti's famous Canzone on love, "Donna me prega," and appears to have taken quite seriously the philosophy of light that is central to that poem. There is a distinctly Poundian flavor in a remark that Prynne makes slightly later in the Olson lecture: "It's great, you know; in France—they keep things alive longer there—the word for magnet is 'aimant' (lover). I just flipped when I heard that." Pound's famous observation about "The rose that [the modern scientist's] magnet makes in the iron filings" and the correspondences that a medieval mind would have established between the form of the rose and the nature of magnetic force seem to hover behind Prynne's excitement that electromagnetism was categorized as a species of love in the French language ("Cavalcanti" 209). Even more relevant, perhaps, is an observation made by H.J. Chaytor about the concept of love in troubadour poetry: "The idea of troubadour love was intellectual rather than emotion; love was an art, restricted, like poetry, by formal rules; the terms 'love' and 'poetry' were identified, and the fourteenth century treatise which summarizes the principles of grammar and metre bore the title *Lays d'Amors*, the Laws of Love" (16). The equation of the structure of language—particularly poetic language—with love makes it possible to imagine language as an expression of human care for the world. Language names the world, not necessarily into being, perhaps, but into form: "love is form," as Olson asserts (*Maximus Poems* 5).²⁸ The synthetic power of

not allude to the Maximus lecture at all. The squeamishness of critics in approaching such a worn-out term—one that Prynne too would use far more circumspectly in his later writings—is understandable, and it is a feeling that I share with them. However, Prynne's moment of abandon—his "unguarded mood," as Keery describes it—should be taken seriously, I feel.

²⁸ Also compare Olson in *The Human Universe*: "[H]e who possesses rhythm possesses the universe. And why art is the only twin life has—its only valid metaphysic" (10).

language poetically deployed might very well express the significance of human presence in the world: the unity of the words “amar,” “pensar,” and “trouvar” in the Provencal dialect, for instance,²⁹ presents a route to forms of love that are expressions of an active and creative thoughtfulness rather than of egotistical grasping. Yet Prynne’s later poetry and prose emphasize language’s restlessness: if language brings together the diversity of the world, language is in itself entirely open to difference, and therefore to strife.

Language and poetry thus proceed dialectically, recognizing both form and content as capable of their own settled felicities and of total and unforgiving turbulence. To use the title of Peter Riley’s first volume of poems, Prynne’s poetry can therefore be thought of as a “Love-Strife Machine.”³⁰ It constantly tends towards unity and coherence—even in the later works—but simultaneously and perpetually falls apart, both as freedom and as anarchy. If much of Prynne’s poetry is a “controlled / amazement” (*Poems* 216), it is also most of the time the opposite: the control itself is opened up to chaos, leading to a poetry that tends equally towards violent destruction and a complementary and affectionate integrity.

The Wound

The wound is a concept that can serve as an ‘objective correlative’ as well as critique of the dualistic structures that govern conceptualizations of existence. As an adventitious opening up of the interiority of the body, the wound is both division and

²⁹ Gugelberger 100; also see notes 27-31 on pp. 109-110.

³⁰ It must be noted, however, that Prynne clearly does not accept Empedocles’ account of love and strife uncritically. According to Empedocles, “All [...] things never cease their continual exchange of position, at

breakage, but it is at the same time a temporary unification of the mostly discontinuous spaces of the flesh and its outside. The notion is thus profoundly physical, and confronts the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity at its most painful and ambiguous moment. The word ‘wound’ appears for the first time in Prynne’s poetry in the 1966 “The Wound, Day and Night”³¹ (*Poems* 64). Here is the poem in its entirety:

Age by default: in some way this must be solved. The covenants that bind into the rock, each to the other are for this, for the argon dating	
by song as echo of the world.	5
O it runs sweetly by, and prints over the heart; I am supremely happy, the whole order set in this, the proper guise, of a song. You can hear the strains from so far off: withdrawn	10
from every haunted place in its graveness, the responsive shift into the millions of years.	
I am born back there, the plaintive chanting under the Atlantic and the unison of forms.	15
It <i>may</i> all flow again if we suppress the breaks, as I long to do, at the far end of that distance and tidings of the land;	
if we dissolve the bars to it and let run	20
the hopes, that preserve the holy fruit on the tree, casting the moist honey, curing the poppy of sleep.	
“And in variety of aspects the sum remains the same, one family”—	25
that it be too much with us, again as beyond that enfeebled history: that we be born at long last into the image of love. (64)	

This poem condenses a series of Prynne’s preoccupations at the time: his distress over the general insularity and timidity of British poetry in comparison with its American

one time all coming together into one through love, at another again being borne away from each other by strife’s repulsion” (Empedocles 166).

³¹ Keston Sutherland observes that the title is from Surrey (“J.H. Prynne and Philology” 152-53).

counterparts; the possibility of extending the Black Mountain ethos to England to create a vital transatlantic alliance (he had already succeeded in bringing Ed Dorn over to Essex); the research he had been doing on the continental drift theory, partially to aid Olson's *Maximus* project; and his discovery of Manilius' *Astronomicon* in the form edited by Housman. On 11 February 1966, Prynne wrote an ecstatic verse letter to Olson:

O Charles look at these
words / I am in mortal
danger from beatitude

the text was edited
by A.E. Housman & was
a life's work

the English (there being
none) I have had
made, for this

for the owl in
the dark, of our heads (Letter to Charles Olson, 11 February 1966)

The attachment that Prynne presumably included with this letter was separated from it at some point, and it is currently filed elsewhere in the Charles Olson archives at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center. But it is not difficult to guess the text that Prynne had in mind. Housman's lifework had been the publication, in the original Latin, of an immensely erudite edition of *Astronomicon* by Manilius. Among the 'miscellaneous' undated Prynne materials at the Dodd Center Olson Collection, we find a page containing two quotations from the first volume of Housman's edition of *Astronomicon* along with prose translations that Prynne made himself or "had made," as he says in his letter; these are undoubtedly the "*words*" that Prynne wanted Olson to "look at." Here is the first quotation (I have added the relevant page numbers from Housman's edition at the end of the lines cited by Prynne):

et quoniam caelo descendit carmen ab alto
et uenit in terras fatorum conditus ordo,
ipsa mihi primum naturae forma canenda est
ponendusque sua totus sub imagine mundus.

[And since it is from high heaven that poetry descends and fate's established order comes to earth, the very pattern of nature must be my verse's first theme and I must set out the whole universe in its proper guise.]

Manilius, *Astronomicon* I.118-121 [Housman 10]

And the second:

hoc opus immensi constructum corpore mundi
membraque naturae diuersa condita forma
aeris atque ignis, terrae plegique iacentis,
uis animae diuina regit, sacroque meatu
conspirat deus et tacita ratione gubernat
mutuaque in cunctas dispensat foedera partes
altera ut alterius uires faciatque feratque
summaque per uarias maneat cognota figuras.

[This great fabric fashioned from the vast frame of the universe, and nature's components in their diverse forms of air, fire, earth, and level sea are ruled by a divine force, a soul; God's holy breath blends throughout. Silently he governs, dispensing the covenants that bind each part with each, so that one exerts influence upon another and is influenced in turn, and in variety of aspects the sum remains the same, one family.]

Manilius, *Astronomicon* I.247-254 [Housman 23-24]³²

It should be obvious that the lines “the whole order set in this, the / proper guise, of a song” from “The Wound” rephrase the latter half of the translation of the first quotation, and that the section in “The Wound” enclosed in quotation marks (lines 23-25) repeat the last two phrases of the second quotation.³³

If the vision of poetry that Manilius articulates here is the younger Prynne's *ars poetica*, then it is certainly very distant from any foundational critique of mimesis or of

³² Manuscript fragment of letter from J.H. Prynne to Charles Olson Research Collection at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center; undated.

³³ Keston Sutherland has already pointed out, even without the assistance of the material from the Dodd Archive, that this section is also from Manilius, though he uses English verse translations by Sherburne (1674) and Creech (1697) that Housman had found generally unsatisfactory (Housman xv). Recognizing Prynne's elegant prose version in those verses, however, is a commendable achievement in itself

bourgeois society. The *Astronomicon* (or *Astronomica*)³⁴ is a five-volume work that uses poetic language to produce a handbook of astronomy, geography, and related mathematics. Prynne's encyclopedic model is therefore not really based on metaphysical poetry and its 'witty' use of scientific terms and knowledge to create tensions between two disparate modes of discourse.³⁵ Rather, his source is the relatively unselfconscious premodern tendency to indite all forms of knowledge as poetry.³⁶ Yet it is interesting to enquire why a 1st-century AD text and its confidence in a divine force that binds the universe into a single family pushed Prynne dangerously close to beatitude and inspired "The Wound, Day and Night." Part of the explanation lies in Prynne's discoveries about

(Sutherland 154-55). My own contribution, I hope, has simplified and clarified the sources, though if Prynne indeed commissioned the translations, the author is yet to be traced.

³⁴ The book has been published under the titles "Astronomica" and "Astronomicon" (the Housman edition, along with many earlier British editions, uses the latter title) since its discovery in 1417 by Poggio Bracciolini (Volk 2).

³⁵ Drew Milne has suggested that one of the major challenges that confront scientifically inclined poetry is the possibility of being reduced to wittiness ("The Art of Wit and the Cambridge Science Park"). Prynne's use of scientific information tends to unsettle many of his readers. In *The Making of the Reader*, Trotter argues that "the scientific language [*High Pink on Chrome* (1975)] employs is very much more elaborate, and indeed achieves a kind of autonomy", and that "the independence of this scientific language (the way it stands out in relief) may have weakened the political accountability of the writing" (Trotter 230). Neil Corcoran also warns against the intellectual hermeticism of Prynne's later work (177). Keston Sutherland's "J.H. Prynne and Philology" instead argues for a 'love of *logos*,' where 'logos' is understood in its widest possible implications, as the primary ethical moment of Prynne's difficulty (passim).

³⁶ In fact, as Prynne's quotation indicates, Manilius saw himself primarily as a poet. Though it has been argued that his poetry belongs to the didactic tradition (Volk 174-82), Manilius claims as precedents to the *Astronomica* not only Hesiod's didactic *Works and Days*, but also Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and writes in the hexameters characteristic of epic poetry (Manilius 83, 85). Despite the fact that very often the poem sounds like an instruction manual, Book 2 declares that its audience is in fact the stars and the skies, along with an elect few individuals favored by the stars:

nec in turba nec turbae carmina condam / sed solus, vacuo veluti vectatus in orbe / liber agam
 currus non occursantibus ullis / nec per iter socios commune regentibus actus, / sed caelo
 noscenda canam, mirantibus astris et gaudente sui mudo per carmina vatis, / vel quibus illa sacros
 non invidere meatus / notitiamque sui, minima est quae turba per orbem.

[Not in the crowd nor for the crowd shall I compose my song, but alone, as though borne round an empty circuit I were freely driving my car with none to cross my path or steer a course beside me over a common route, I shall sing it for the skies to hear, while the stars marvel and the firmament rejoices in the song of its bard, and for those whom the stars have not grudged knowledge of themselves and their sacred motions, the smallest society on earth.] (Manilius 92, 93)

Manilius seems to have been an early champion of coterie poetry, as also of poetry that is interested in communicating with the universe rather than with individuals. The thematic of a small and select audience for poetry appears to go back indefinitely in time.

the peregrinations of the earth's crust. The relevance of a letter Prynne wrote in 1966 to *The English Intelligencer* for this poem has already been noted,³⁷ but the intricate ways in which it intersects with the poem's conceptual scheme can bear further explication.

In the letter, titled "A Communication," Prynne declares that "The Wound, Day and Night" "was a consequence in some sense at least of the Royal Society Symposium on *Continental Drift* (London, 1965). And more especially, Miller's paper on Geochronology. I say this mainly as propaganda, since the political & personal relevance of this volume has to be surveyed to be believed" (27). While it is from another paper presented at the Symposium that Prynne subsequently quotes (Defant's description of how land experiences tides like the sea), Miller's paper is even more dramatic—from Prynne's point of view—for the way he produces maps of a unified land mass that predated the shifts in the earth's crust that produced the current landmasses. Miller "fits" together—by dating rocks through the "potassium-argon and rubidium-strontium methods" (Miller 182; hence Prynne's reference to "argon dating" in the poem)—Europe and Greenland, and their sum is fitted into the current North America.³⁸ The conceit that the British Isles had just wandered away from North America through a spreading ocean floor, and that the transatlantic ligature that Prynne imagined was in fact merely repeating what was for the earth a simple fact, would indeed have thrilled Prynne. The whole poem is therefore moved by the possibility of a continuous flow between land and sea, song and history. The world, which is "too much with us" according to Wordsworth, might finally be with us, undivided and released from the framework of religious hope

³⁷ See Sutherland's "J.H. Prynne and Philology" 154; also see 87-89 for a discussion of the relevance of the passages from Manilius.

into the possibility of love as the ending of separation. The desire to “suppress the / breaks,” however, is quietly ironized through the significant gap—qualitatively different from line breaks in the poem—that precedes the phrase ‘of love.’ The pressure of religious, scientific, and lyric rhetoric used in the poem converges upon that word as it sometimes did in the metaphysical love lyric. But if the thematic of love in metaphysical poetry was a means to hold together its more adventurous forays into other domains of knowledge, in this poem love is a suspended possibility—as indicated by the conditionals that proliferate towards the end of the poem—of bridged gaps. A partial reworking of Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” “The Wound” sees the sea not as a reminder of discontinuity as Arnold’s speaker does, but as united with the land through identical rhythmic expansions and contractions. This erotic movement of love—which is the strongest justification for the continuation of difference—is both the wound and the healing of the wound.³⁹ And for Prynne, the wound appears to be a concept that unifies space and time.⁴⁰ It is not surprising, therefore, that Prynne sent Ed Dorn a copy of “The Wound” in which the poem is superimposed on one of Miller’s maps depicting the “breaks” in the crust that the poem hopes to “suppress” in the interests of a transatlantic alliance that is cognizant of the unity of the continents that overrides an “enfeebled

³⁸ “The 500 fm. line along the east coast of Greenland has been fitted to that of northwestern Europe to form one unit. This unit, that is, the 500 fm. line of the west coast of Greenland and the Channel approaches have been fitted on to the 500 fm. line of Canada” (J.A. Miller 180).

³⁹ Keston Sutherland argues that the word ‘love’ in Prynne’s early poetry means “the subversive necessity of knowledge as our most noble possession, and the trust extended to philology as both the route to that possession and the fundamental guarantee of its possible future possession by the whole *gens*” (“J.H. Prynne and Philology” 257).

⁴⁰ Speaking to Olson later that year of the word “Hrīm” in the Old English poem “Wanderer,” Prynne observes that “*Hrīm* connects directly with *rim*, in the first sense of “crust” (of a wound, which is again history as pain, the infliction of time)—which leads to AS *brīse*, earth, ground, the crust on which we walk. The ridge here is *welt*, what we join to as we go in our shoes” (Letter to Olson, 26 July 1966, page 2).

history.”⁴¹

As Grazing the Earth

In Prynne's poetry of the sixties and seventies, the poem's principle of coherence, its tendency towards design, is still the author's responsibility. While the difficulty of the poems permit quite a large scope for interpretive freedom for the reader, the poem also seems to be equipped to survive irrespective of the reader's desire and need for unity. A particularly good example of this predominantly Modernist mode of difficulty is the untitled lyric that appears in *Wound Response* (1974):

As grazing the earth the sun raises
its mouth to the night rick, ox-eye'd
and burning, strewn over the phase path

At the turning-places of the sun the
head glistens, dew falls from the apse line:

O lye still, thou Little Musgrave, the
grass is wet and streak'd with light (229)

Long and short lines alternate in the ballad style, which is concretized in the quotation “O lye still, thou Little Musgrave” from the folk song “Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard.”⁴²

⁴¹ Manuscript fragment of letter from J.H. Pryne to Ed Dorn in the Charles Olson Research Collection at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center; not dated.

⁴² This is the section of the poem that has received some critical attention. See particularly *Fragments and Meaning in Traditional Song: From the Blues to the Baltic* by Mary-Ann Constantine (229-30). The authors point

Yet it could as easily be a sonnet; if the misaligned lines are shuffled into order, the outlines of a sestet and two quatrains will be visible. While the poem obviously plays upon the ‘wound’ of the day and the light imagery that the early Prynne takes over in part from Pound,⁴³ part of the justification for its presence in *Wound Response* is encoded into this fragment of song. First a note upon the ‘O.’ Prynne calls such interjections “near-inarticulate particles of speech,” adding that among these, “*Oh* is the most widespread and important in the history of English poetic diction” (“English Poetry and Emphatical Language” 140). The power of ‘O’ and ‘Oh,’ Prynne argues, derives in part from the “vacancy of the efforts to give it lexical definition” (162). A concern with parts of speech whose content is indeterminate or mostly structural—and pronouns and articles belong to this class—contributes to Prynne’s interest in the poetic ‘O.’ Yet it is not merely as pure sonic and almost post/pre-linguistic utterance that Prynne values the interjection: for him,

the extremely self-conscious and genre-governed shaping of contexts for merging apostrophe and exclamation, public and private modes, makes the use of lyrical *O* a marker for the boundary of one discourse where it is momentarily exceeded by another; used strongly, the word may convoke the currencies of previous usage by quoting recursively the power of poetic speech itself, calling it in evidence to locate a dialectical convergence of outward and inward sense. (168)

As apostrophe, the interjection moves towards external reference, while as exclamation, it

out the pun in “ox-eyed” but fail to connect it to the preceding words, “night rick”, which would indicate, of course, nitric oxide.

⁴³ When Anthony Mellors suggests in *Later Modernist Poetry from Pound to Prynne* that there are echoes of Pound’s translation of Cavalcanti’s “Cazone d’Amour” (87), he probably has in mind the following lines from Canto XXXVI:

Being divided, set out from colour,
Disjunct in mid darkness
Grazeth the light, one moving by other,
Being divided, divided from all falsity
Worthy of trust
From him alone mercy proceedeth. (*Cantos* 179)

is an expression of lyric interiority. In “As grazing the earth,” the applied fragment of song invokes sentiments and poetic conventions that are explicitly removed from the language of the rest of the poem in ways very similar to that described by Prynne himself in his lecture. In the line from the folk song, apostrophic and exclamatory effects coexist: there is a specific person being addressed here, viz. Little Musgrave. But the ‘O’ expresses the complicated pain of social trespass: it is uttered by Lady Barnard, who is in bed with Little Musgrave as Lord Barnard approaches early in the morning with his men to avenge himself for her adultery. Musgrave hears the approaching band of men and Lord Barnard’s horn, but the Lady persuades him to “lye still,” leading to Lord Barnard’s discovery of the lovers in bed, and their death at his hands shortly thereafter. In this sense, the ‘O’ is also a complex lament that addresses both the fact of the adultery and the proleptic consciousness of its penalty. To this extent, despite its unobtrusive and untitled presence in *Wound Response*, this poem is directly and dramatically connected to the motif of the wound.⁴⁴

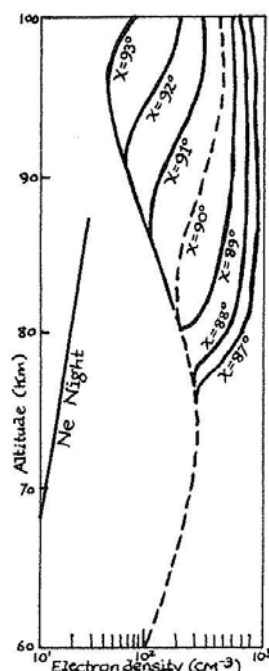
The dynamics of lyric address are augmented by the poem’s preoccupation with the material conditions that make that dewy morning possible. The central pun of the poem—“night / rick, ox-eye’d” (nitric oxide)—is particularly important as a context for addressing Prynne’s use of scientific terminology. The full measure of this pun becomes available only through a different version of the poem that was published in the journal

However, Mellors misquotes Prynne’s poem as “As grazing the light,” rather than “As grazing the earth,” probably because Mellors was discussing at that point Pound’s use of light imagery. The misquote has the effect of artificially amplifying the Poundian ‘echo’ in Prynne’s poem.

⁴⁴ The word ‘uh’ that Prynne uses repeatedly in *Triodes* (1999) might be read as a deflated, de-emphasized, non-apostrophic version of the “emphatical” ‘O’ or ‘Oh’: the very possibility of this lyric convention being retained, even in heavily ironized forms, is under severe pressure in that volume. Also note the singularly unemphatic ‘oh’ in the section from *Streak~~~Willing~~~Entourage Artesian* I quote on page 39 (the word appears in stanza 1 and stanza 5). Here ‘oh’ is used in the sense of a minimal recognition of a state of

Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogogoch in 1973. Due to its extreme rarity, the complete document is given below:⁴⁵

In runs where the oxygen flow was varied the relative nitric oxide concentrations were therefore given by the corresponding light intensities observed by the photomultiplier, since the flow rate of molecular oxygen used (always a large excess). The photomultiplier was calibrated to read directly in nitric oxide flow rate by observing the enhancement of the air afterglow intensity when nitric oxide (diluted with nitrogen) was added to the reaction system at known flow rates between the point of oxygen and the photomultiplier. For constant oxygen flow rate, the photomultiplier current plotted against the flow rate of added nitric oxide + oxygen mixture gave a straight line whose slope was independent of oxygen flow rate; and hence the small decay



As grazing the earth
the sun raises
its mouth to the night
rick, ox-eye'd
and burning, strewn over
the phase path

At the turning-places
of the sun the
head glistens, jaw falls
from the apse line

O lye still, thou
Little Musgrave, the
grass is wet
and streak'd with light

In both cases the reactions are fully allowed by adiabatic electronic correlation rules for either bent or linear transition states (Walsh 1953): $N(^1S_u) + O_2(^3\Sigma_g^-) \rightleftharpoons NOO(^3A' \text{ or } ^4A') \rightarrow NO(^2\Pi) + O(^3P_g)$, ($^2\Sigma^+$ or $^1\Sigma^+$ if linear); $N(^4S_u) + NO(^2\Pi) \rightleftharpoons NNO(^3A' \text{ or } ^3A'') \rightarrow N_2(^1\Sigma_g^+) + O(^3P_g)$, ($^3\Pi$ if linear). Molecular orbital considerations indicate that both which is bent in its ground state and probably also in arises from the presence of an extra electron as compared with linear $^1\Sigma^+$ ground states (Mulliken 1935), and orbital derived from the π_u orbital of the linear molecule (Walsh 1953). These orbitals decrease greatly in energy as the bond angle is reduced, and the complex NOO would be expected to have a bent $^3A'$ or $^2B''$ lowest state. A low-lying quartet state is unlikely for this complex, as this could only be produced by promotion of an electron from the closed shell. Although N_2O

J. Rymer

The only attempt so far to provide a detailed reading of this poem can be found in

Fragments and Meaning in Traditional Song by Mary-Ann Constantine and Gerald Porter. It

affairs, as in "oh, in that case" and as the American alphanumeric crossover in which "oh" stands for the number zero.

⁴⁵ I am extremely grateful to Ian Patterson for generously providing me with a scan of this page. Part of this image has been reproduced on the cover of Birgitta Johansson's *The Engineering of Being*.

recognizes the fact that the poem was published “ballad-style, on broadsheet” (229). But apart from pointing out the pun “ox eye’d/oxide” and observing that the broadsheet appends “a sinuous diagram of the density of electrons in the upper atmosphere” (229), the reading does not address the poem in any detail, quickly moving on to generalizations about science and poetry. Other readings have been cursory at best, and have not addressed the implications of this “broadside” version. This text clearly presents itself as both cryptogram and its solution, the solution itself being further encoded into visual and verbal representations. The ‘puzzle’ structure of the ideogram or the hieroglyph would be appropriate for this form of the poem, particularly since it is activated here by nothing less than the full authority of the author: note the signature tastefully integrated into the overall design of the painstakingly handwritten page.

First, a note on the appearance of the page. Despite the preponderance of scientific data usually associated with modernity, the scribal penmanship points back to medieval illuminated manuscripts and non-mechanized modes of textual reproduction. The distinctive cursive style used for the text of the poem is based primarily on Gothic lettering. Gothic styles were widespread during early Renaissance despite the incipient popularity of Humanist Italic fonts that were used by pioneering printers like Aldus, partly due to their compactness and uniformity, and partly due to their association with the ‘modern’ spirit.⁴⁶ The disposition of space towards the middle of Prynne’s document invokes expansive Gothic round letters. Prynne’s ‘d’s with their backward curve are very similar to those favored by Petrarch, but this ‘d’ was also common in the Secretary style

⁴⁶ In *A History of Lettering*, Nicolette Gray points out that though classical lettering was revived in Italy in the fifteenth century, its acceptance in the rest of Europe was uneven during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. New forms of the Gothic script were devised in Germany, for instance, and both in France and in England, there were efforts to develop a style that was neither Roman nor Gothic (Gray 137).

that preceded italics in England. It in fact derives from Latin Uncials: the backswept ascender is typical of this script, which has been dated back to the late 4th-century AD and the earliest examples are of North African origin.⁴⁷ The ‘w’ with its curving final stroke, the ‘t’s crossed with disproportionately long horizontal strokes, the angular lower loops of the ‘g’s that are often closed with a fine hairline, the ‘k’ with its closed loops, and the general uprightness and roundness of the lettering, are all variations of late-medieval styles.⁴⁸ The ornate signature with its ligature between ‘H’ and ‘P’ and the moderate but nevertheless antiquated flourishes add to the general impression of writing-as-artifact. The blocks of ‘printed’ text above and below, by contrast, create a more modern but cluttered effect through the use of slab serifs and an overall lack of variation in stroke thickness. The ‘g’ with its closed circular double loops signals the authority of the printed page: this form of the letter is standard in printing fonts (including Times New Roman) due to its compactness relative to the less formal versions that have a longer descending line. It is usually excluded from cursive forms because of the obvious difficulty in accurately reproducing it; it is also absent in typewriter fonts on which a number of the letters used by Prynne in the framing text are modelled.

Two clear fonts are thus established, one in which authorial creativity is emphasized in the poem through a flowing, early-modern hand and generous allocation of space,⁴⁹ and the other which presents the spatially challenged yet disproportionately

⁴⁷ Knight 33.

⁴⁸ For excellent specimens of scripts up to the Renaissance with useful notes, see *Historical Scripts: From Classical Times to the Renaissance* by Stan Knight. Dr. Diane Tillotson’s website “Medieval Writing: History, Heritage and Data Source” is also a very useful resource, with sections devoted to the evolution of individual letters of the alphabet.

⁴⁹ Stone-Richards includes this poem, along with *Day Light Songs*, *Voll Verdienst*, and *A Night Square*, among Prynne’s poems influenced by “the spaced writing and visual scansion” of Hölderlin’s *Bruchstücke* (218 n.120). Prynne’s later poems usually operate in more constrained spaces, though there are marked

authoritative language of the printed text and the published scientific paper. The high-handed indifference with which the ‘printed’ text is cut into discontinuous chunks to accommodate the demands of overall design implies that its authority is being challenged by the more ‘primitive’ handicraft mode of production that still characterizes poetry. The authority of the poet supersedes the authority of Clyne and Thrush, authors of the article from which Prynne quotes: the signature is displayed prominently in a hollow carved out from the text, which is allowed to remain interrupted and incomplete.⁵⁰ The final effect is of the poem, image, and signature being superimposed on the text of the article, rather than of the quoted text being arranged around these more ‘creative’ components of the design. Yet unlike Prynne’s early essay “A Pedantic Note in Two Parts,” where the printed text is photocopied and Prynne’s handwritten comments surround the reproduced text, here we find only a handwritten imitation of typeface. The dialogue between science and poetry that unfolds in the poem and accompanying diagram thus takes place in an environment of ambivalent mimesis, and there is a strong unease regarding the possible imbalances of power engendered by the explicit introduction of scientific discourse into poetry.

Yet the poem arises not from a desire to dismiss science but in fact to engage in a creative dialogue with it. The framing text consists of direct quotations from “Kinetics of the Reactions of Active Nitrogen with Oxygen and with Nitric Oxide” by M.A.A. Clyne and B.A. Thrush published in 1961. The diagram is a slightly modified version of the

exceptions, particularly a long lyric interlude in *The Oval Window* that quotes freely from Shakespeare (*Poems* 327).

⁵⁰ Considered in this form, “As grazing the earth” is analogous to “Thanks for the Memory” (*Poems* 220), another poem from *Wound Response* that consists of a quotation from a scientific article on the biochemistry of memory; here too the final sentence is left hanging. “Thanks for the Memory” is pure quotation; it consists of a sentence borrowed from the article “A Molecular Basis for Learning and Memory” published

graph provided in A. C. Aikin's "A Preliminary Study of Sunrise Effects in the D Region," published in *Electron Density Profiles in the Ionosphere and Exosphere* (1962). The latter essay is also the source of the first line of the poem, "As grazing the earth" as well as a possible source of the phrase "phase path":

Bracewell notes that the change is initiated at a time when the sun's rays grazing the earth, illuminate a point 60 km above the ground. The figures could also be interpreted in another way in that a point 90 km above the ground would be illuminated by this time by a ray which has just grazed a region situated 35 km above the earth, thus giving rise to the idea of a screening layer. There is no corresponding decrease in the phase path at this time. (102)

First, some comments on the scientific background of "As grazing the earth." The quoted text is taken from an essay that estimates the "rate of decay of nitrogen atoms in a fast-flow system in the presence of oxygen" (259). Under high temperatures (between 412 and 755 degrees Kelvin) and large supplies of oxygen, nitrogen atoms combine with oxygen atoms to form nitric oxide (or nitrogen monoxide) and atomic oxygen: $N + O_2 \rightarrow NO + O$. Nitric oxide reacts further with oxygen to produce the more stable nitrous oxide, emitting visible light in the process: $NO + O_2 \rightarrow NO_2 + O + h\nu$. The experiment uses this light to measure the amount of nitric oxide produced and therefore the quantity of atomic nitrogen that has been converted into nitrogen oxides. To assume that this information is relevant to the poem is perhaps not very 'postmodern,' yet the central placement of the pun "night / rick, ox-eye'd" along with the general scrupulousness with which the whole broadside has been executed pushes us in that direction.

The diagram in the poem and its source suggests that the poem is a reference to electron densities in the D region of the ionosphere during sunrise. Since the poem is

in 1972. Even the title, "Thanks for the Memory," repeats the title of a popular duet in the 1938 film *The*

clearly about sunrise, we might try to investigate what nitric oxide has to do with sunrise. One of the effects of daybreak is a brief surge in the amount of nitric oxide in the upper ionosphere (the E region) followed by a rapid breakdown of nitric oxide as the day advances. In other words, as the rising sun “grazes” the earth’s atmosphere at a solar zenith angle of slightly below 90 degrees (when the sun is actually below the horizon, but is faintly sensed due to atmospheric refraction of light rays), it initiates the production of nitric oxide that contributes to the increase in electron density for zenith angles below 90 degrees. As the sun rises further, light energy from the sun helps molecules to gather enough energy to capture free electrons. Both “phase path” and “apse line” refer to different forms of deviation: the phase path represents the change in the phase of a wave as a result of traversing a medium; the apse line describes an orbit’s deviation from an exact circle. But as the poem concludes, it moves closer to the ground: the tears of the goddess Aurora—for that is what dew was thought to be—adorns the grass, as does the light, partially spent by its eventful journey through the earth’s atmosphere. It is now food for grass.

I would like to hypothesize at this point that the two untitled poems in *Wound Response* can be read as dealing with the scientific and poetic significance of the word ‘aurora’: as the “polar lights” or the aurora borealis, and Aurora as a personification of dawn. Both begin with references to food: ‘bread’ in the first poem and the conceit of the sun as a ruminant in the second; then they draw from astronomical jargon, and conclude with the transformation of light into food by plants. There is a circularity here that seems out of phase with the open-endedness of Postmodernism, even though there are obvious residues that must refuse inclusion into any neat schema. The place of

Prynne's engagement with the sciences in such elaborate constructs appears to be at least partially impelled by a sense of inclusive beauty. At least as a reader, my faltering attempts to decode what must be elementary information to a trained geophysicist or physical chemist overwhelmed me with a sudden sense of plenitude, for the concept of daybreak had acquired added grandeur by being understood as imbricated in both vast cosmic phenomena and the simple fact of food on the table. The explicit and dated lyricism of "Little Musgrave" becomes almost peripheral to the astral lyricism offered by geophysics. Prynne's vision of poetry as a depot for every kind of cognitive activity seems to be explicitly concretized in this version of "As grazing the earth." Most of all, the poet seems to be interested in demonstrating that the superposed layers of discourse in the poem can in fact be separated, and that the product of this dissection can produce an art-object whose aesthetic value is in no way diminished in the process. To this extent, this is a unique instance of Prynne posing as his own reader.

Yet the holograph version of "As grazing the earth" also emphasizes the asymmetries that impose a strong authorial presence in the poem. The 'gloss' that Prynne provides through his notes and diagrams acknowledges the knowledge gaps across which his poems shuttle. (The notes themselves are riddles, and even in this age of the Google deep-search, this reader had to wade through mountains of unfamiliar material in search of the source of the diagram, which is available only in a print version.) It installs an emphatic authorial presence whose authority is magnified by its apparent mastery over areas of knowledge that have become increasingly unavailable to the stereotypical poet and reader. In fact, the disconcerting sense of authority that pervades much of Prynne's poems can be concretized in his use of scientific 'jargon.' This is partly a paltry form of

difficulty analogous to the “contingent difficulty” proposed by Steiner—it is at least in theory susceptible to decoding by the person with the ‘right’ disciplinary background. But it is also a demonstration of the ways in which striations of knowledge domains might be navigated through individual effort for which the figure of the author becomes a powerful symbol. The combination of an obtrusive authorial presence reinforced by the references to science creates very real problems of authority that the text does not explicitly disavow. The reader’s experience of freedom cannot be imagined as granted in any way by the poem or its ‘implied author’; it is a gift that the reader alone can give herself.

At the same time, a poem like “As grazing the earth” has a certain lyric grace that exists in tandem with, and draws sustenance from, the rosy glow of nitric oxide reactions in the upper atmosphere. It calls for skills other than those learnt from an engagement with the traditional lyric, but it also functions as if those traditional skills might be just about enough to discern and enjoy an updated aubade. The reader is allowed to draw upon a known set of affective states and their cosmic correlates, despite the poem’s self-conscious awareness of the datedness of such correspondences—the only piece of dialogue is thus a quotation from an Elizabethan lyric. Even though the poem is far from simple or even paraphrasable, it is open to being possessed through and as knowledge. The erotics of difficulty is in full play here, and the dominant authorial presence endows it with institutional support. Thus the coy poem which will withhold its treasures except to the intrepid reader who dares to go beyond her comfort zone affirms the gendered dynamic at play in engagements with difficult poetry. The pleasures of decoding can be bought only at the price of ceding control to external authority, both social and authorial.

In the later poetry, this model of riddling gives way to a far more high-risk endeavor, both for the reader and the author: ceding authorial control, but doing so without believing that this in any way entails freedom either for the author or the reader. In some ways, this poetry in fact appears to be unable completely to distinguish between freedom and unfreedom.

Prynne's most explicit description of his own poetic strategies in relation to an imagined reader appears in his 1985 letter to fellow British poet Allen Fisher. I include a lengthy passage below:

I do not like to speak of doctrinaire intention in the work of composition; but as I now reconstruct it in retrospect a central purpose in *Down where changed* was specifically to compel contradiction to the point of terminal obduracy, without providing outlets for hopeful compromise or an ideal intransigence. That terminus is unreachable, naturally, and none of this in any case affects the last-ditch independence of reader options which the author cannot know or perhaps even guess. [...] The reader, challenged as if lazy and greedy for inconvenience, is offered the tacit advantage of claiming immunity through a more mindful clarity of insight ('sophistication' is the bribe). But paralogical regression confutes and poisons an already sarcastic collusion, to induce rapid blockade as if no more than aesthetic spectacle (what you call the sestinic), hardly touching the practical choices of everyday life which are nonetheless by inference the simple brute stuff of this book. The reader's freedom was to be constantly interfered with, as an invidious commodity; pretending (precisely) that there had been no acceptance of immunity to the violence and yet also noticing that pretence as just that. ("Letter to Allen Fisher" 157)

Prynne's ironic distance from his own work is, as must be obvious, exemplary: the self-reflexivity of the concluding lines indicates the levels of doubled awareness that preside over his poetic productivity. His is also an authorial position that has worked out some of the most complex affective states induced by difficulty in poetry. The appeal to "male 'courage'" that makes the display of pain itself painful, for instance, can be related to a large quantity of difficult poetry that makes free use of a certain kind of 'manly' rhetoric (Pound and Olson, for instance, or Bruce Andrews). A strong contrast is the work of

Ashbery, where authorial personae appear equally wounded by the poem's betrayal of meaning, as I have already argued in the preceding chapter. John Vincent's insight that difficulty elicits a rich range of emotional responses from the reader⁵¹ is anticipated here, but the poet's canniness about the effects of difficulty makes it possible to imagine that difficulty might in fact be a valid element of composition rather than a purely subjective and relative experience of the reader. The text's self-consciousness is thus also a metaphor for its acute sensitivity to possible reader-responses: interiority is constantly beamed back into exteriority. Yet it is the concluding sentence of the quotation that is most striking: "The reader's freedom was to be constantly interfered with, as an invidious commodity; pretending (precisely) that there had been no acceptance of immunity to the violence and yet also noticing that pretence as just that." On the one hand, the poem refuses to acknowledge the freedom of the reader; on the other hand, the poem acknowledges that refusal as pretence. The result is not a granting of freedom to the reader, nor the reader's wrenching of freedom from an authoritarian text (as often happens in deconstructive readings), but an opening up of the concept of freedom to critique.

Love

The freedom of the poem and the reader become increasingly prominent in Prynne's later work. Consider the following section from *Unanswering Rational Shore* (2001):

Profuse reclaim form a scrape or belt, funnel do
axial parenthood block the mustard dots briefly
act forward, their age layer for layer in this

⁵¹ *Queer Lyrics* 12.

tied-off accession. Appellate at dictum at
its debit resonance fixing prolusion, optic rage
performs even dots right now. This is the top
passion play and counted out for renewal patch,

allergic his dispute braving off. Making a dot
difference, make an offer; these feeling spray-on
skin products are uninhabitable, by field and stream.
Tell us, only for as many as crowd in through
the door of the diluvium, the romance of a new
organic dyscrasia vibrato fretting its early bits
on release on ambit. Early grief, late woe ahead. (*Poems* 519)

The title is perplexing, but invites speculation. The shore suggests land adjoining the sea
or a large body of water: this is the traditional space for the experience of limits, the
strongest form of which experience is embodied in the concept of the sublime.

Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," Arnold's "Dover Beach," Whitman's "Out of the Cradle
Endlessly Rocking," Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West" are all meditations on the
shores of rivers or seas. It is only in Whitman, however, that the sea is engaged in
dialogue: it is questioned, and its monosyllabic answer—"death"—becomes the wisdom
upon which the personal outpourings of the poet gains relevance (Whitman 78).

Rationalism, however, tends to be inhospitable towards romanticism and its
prosopopoeic fancies, so that 'rational shores,' unlike, perhaps, irrational or non-rational
shores, can provide no answers. The absence of conversational reciprocity is thus the
titular paradox that moves this communicative act, and as readers, we must already be
prepared to encounter the elaborations and variations of this evocation of inarticulate
landscapes.

*Unanswering Rational Shore*⁵² was published in October 2001. In other words, the

⁵² One of the possible sources for the poem's title is Emily Dickinson's poem beginning "I've none to tell
me to but Thee" (#928):

poem's publication coincided almost exactly with America's declaration of war on Afghanistan following the attack on the World Trade Center in New York. The word 'mustard' in the first stanza evokes not only Western culinary comforts, but also a chemical weapon used in World Wars I and II and the Iran-Iraq war: Sulfur Mustard (also called Mustard Gas), a vesicant that produces blisters and burns when absorbed through the skin. The juxtaposition of the word 'mustard' and 'dots' activates the Old English (and probably original) sense of the word 'dot': 'the head of a boil' (OED). 'Mustard dots' thus suggest the painful blisters that mustard gas produces, primarily on the skin.⁵³ The reference in the following stanza to "feeling spray on / skin products" in close proximity to "dyscrasia"⁵⁴—a condition that can be caused by sulfur mustard—continue

I've none to tell me to but Thee
 So when Thou failest, nobody.
 It was a little tie —
 It just held Two, nor those it held
 Since Somewhere thy sweet Face has spilled
 Beyond my Boundary —

If things were opposite — and Me
 And Me it were — that ebbed from Thee
 On some unanswering Shore —
 Would'st Thou seek so — just say
 That I the Answer may pursue
 Unto the lips it eddied through —
 So — overtaking Thee — (Dickinson 881)

⁵³ In "Toxicology of Mustard Gas," Wormser notes that one of short-term effects of mustard gas is the appearance of "numerous blisters about the size of a pin's head or smaller, and sometimes developing into large blisters" (Wormser 164). Kehe et. al. elaborate on the specific nature of these blisters: "SM [Sulfur-Mustard]-induced blisters are thin-walled and filled with an amber-coloured fluid. A positive Nikolsky sign was frequently described, which means that rubbing of the skin will produce more blistering. Skin blistering may last for several days to weeks after a single SM exposure [...]. These blisters are clinical signs of dermal-epidermal separation of skin layers" (Kehe 13).

⁵⁴ "Blood dyscrasia" is defined by the *Dictionary of Medical Terms* thus: "any unusual blood condition such as a low cell count or platelet count" (46). Sulfur Mustard can cause bone-marrow suppression (Rice 579). According to Mahmoudi et. al., "When absorbed in large amounts, SM can damage rapidly proliferating cells of bone marrow and may cause severe suppression of the immune system. Early investigations on SM casualties during the Iran-Iraq War showed decreased immunoresponsiveness, expressed as leukopenia, lymphopenia, and neutropenia, as well as hypoplasia and atrophy of the bone marrow" (Mahmoudi 1480). 'Leukopenia, lymphopenia, and neutropenia' refer to abnormally low levels of leucocytes, lymphocytes, and neutrophils respectively; all three are important components of blood and are produced in the bone marrow.

to explore the chemistry of poisoning through percutaneous absorption. At the same time, the word ‘mustard’ also evokes the ‘mustard stain,’ the military decoration awarded to combat paratroopers. While the poem does not comment on the relationship between this now rare form of chemical warfare and the imminent war in Afghanistan—America’s second (at the time) war against an Islamic country—the appearance of the word “alembic” on the second page of the poem indicates the poem’s awareness of the traces of Arabic culture embedded within the English language (*Poems* 520). The alembic, which is a still or an apparatus for distillation, acquires its name from the original Arab *al-anbiq*. The poem thus uses chemistry—a discipline and word derived from the Arabic *al-chemy*—as a metonym for the intellectual contributions of the Middle East to Western science and thought. The juxtaposition of chemical warfare and the Islamic origins of chemistry against a backdrop of a looming war against Islamic terrorism does not indicate a clear political or moral statement so much as an activation of the history of contact between the Middle East and the West, a contact that was mostly facilitated by the frequent wars between the two cultures.

My reading of these lines from *Unanswering Rational Shore* might be seen as an exercise in freedom: there is no authorial support for the particular reading I have produced, no limited-edition solution to the puzzle that can be hunted up and compared with my results. The melancholy tone of the poem signaled by the last sentence—“Early grief, late woe ahead”—impelled me to locate a possible historical reason for that distress, going by the fact that much of Prynne’s poetry is implicitly ‘occasional.’ My choice of Afghanistan is, however, somewhat arbitrary, though it is likely that Prynne, like a lot of Left-oriented artists and thinkers, would have felt unhappy (to say the least) about the

bombing of Afghanistan. (Though one could also think of the self-immolation-attempt by five individuals at Tiananmen Square on 23 January 2001; a massive earthquake in Gujarat that killed 12,000; and so on. Thankfully, one is spared the task of sifting through ‘personal’ references due to the extreme measures Prynne takes to protect his privacy.) Most of the connections I establish must exist ultimately outside the secure premises of author-reader accord. At the same time, the gravitas of the lines pushes the reader to search for alternative meanings to apparently innocuous words: thus, I discovered the sinister Sulfur Mustard and an obsolete meaning for the word ‘dot.’ In other words, the text seems to push readings in certain directions without necessarily endorsing or privileging particular strands of association. A reading such as the one I’ve attempted to produce for *Unanswering Rational Shore* is thus obviously not a result of an unproblematic communicative act arising from authorial intention, mediated by the text, and transcribed back into its original data in the reader’s mind. Instead, it is the result of the reader *wanting* to find meaning, ardently desiring dialogue with the text, adamantly refusing the text’s rebuffs, and seeking within the labyrinths of language arrangements of significance for which the author cannot take individual responsibility. Such a reading might be taken, in other words, as an act of love.

Prynne would later write in his commentary on Shakespeare’s Sonnet 94 that “obscurity is perhaps a trial or test of the reader’s own constancy, to endure the pain of unknowing” (3). The immediate context is the pronominal ambiguity in Wyatt, but this observation might be easily extrapolated to the experience of the willing reader in the face of poetry that cannot be fitted into the framework of knowing, both in the cognitive and the Biblical senses. The reader’s constancy can be measured by her ability to endure

“unknowing” and remain “constant” to the text. If these terms smack of Christian martyrdom as well as chaste Neoplatonic love, then it is certainly not accidental. The phrase “pain of unknowing” will certainly bear some unpacking. The somewhat quaint word “unknowing” was in fact popularized through its use in the title of the highly influential text of Christian mysticism, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (1400). Prynne was aware of this work at least since 1966. In the poem “For This, For This,” first published in *The English Intelligencer* in 1966, he quotes thrice from “The Epistle of Discretion of Stirrings,” which is attributed to the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*.⁵⁵ *The Cloud* synthesizes, like the work of Augustine, the Neoplatonic and Christian traditions. The image of the cloud is drawn from Pseudo Dionysius,⁵⁶ who himself borrowed it from St. Clement of Alexandria’s *Stromatum*. According to Phyllis Hodgson,

In these basic texts [of Dionysus and Clement] Mount Sinai symbolized the mount of perfection. When Moses was purified not only from sin but also from all attachments to things below God, and had reached the limit of his own natural

⁵⁵ Here is a modernized version of passage from “The Epistle” quoted by Prynne:

And thereto when thou seest that all such works in their use may be both good and evil; I pray thee leave them both, for that is the most ease for thee for to do, if thou wilt be meek, and leave the curious beholding and seeking in thy wits to look whether is better. But do thou thus: set the one on the one hand, and the other on the other, and choose thee a thing the which is hid between them; the which thing, when it is had, giveth thee leave in freedom of spirit to begin and to cease in holding any of the others at thine own full list, without any blame.

The poem divides this up into three sections, with the last section constituting the poem’s conclusion; Prynne uses Middle English orthography: “And perto when pou seest pat alle soche werkes in peire use mow be bope good & iuel, I preie pee leue hem bope, for pat is pe most ese for pee for to doo if pou wilt be meek” (*Poems* 72); “And leue pe corious beholding & seching in pi wittes to loke whe per is betir” (*Poems* 73); “Bot do pou pus: sette pe tone on pe to honde and pe toper on pe toper, and chese pee a ping pe whiche is hid bitwix hem, pe whiche ping when it is had, zeuep pee leue, in fredom of spirite, to beginne and to seese in holding any of pe oper at pin owne full list, wipouten any blame” (*Poems* 73).

⁵⁶ Pseudo Dionysius’ *De Mystica Theologia*, though accepted as a Christian text, does not contain any reference to Christ (Lees Vol. 1, 101). Lees points out the origin of the name: “By taking as a pseudonym the name of a convert of St. Paul, [...] Ps.-Dionysius seems to have aligned himself formally with the Christian tradition of mystical theology. [This] fiction has to do with St. Paul’s reference to the altar in Athens dedicated “To an unknown God” [...]. Ps.-Dionysius, that is, in accordance with an accepted literary practice of his day, attached his personal conviction of God’s unknowability—the idea which dominates his theology—to a higher authority, and wrote as the recipient and expositor of apostolic wisdom” (Lees Vol.1, 104). In *De Mystica Theologia*, he develops the “via negativa” that would influence the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, who would go on to translate *De Mystica Theologia* under the title “Deonise Hid Diuinite.”

powers, he entered the cloud on the summit which obscured the world and likewise veiled God. In the darkness of that thick cloud where nothing was seen, he heard the word of God. The darkness paradoxically proved the way to Light. (Hodgson xliii)

It is this revelatory cloud that broods over the “pain of unknowing.” Unlike the original story, *The Cloud of Unknowing* uses the image of the cloud both affirmatively and negatively. ‘Unknowing’ is a desirable condition, because God is not knowable through reason. Yet one cannot rest permanently in that unknowing, and must strive to break through the cloud; this is possible only through an intense love for God, which can pierce through the cloud. Love is thus the source of ultimate knowledge:

For whi he [sic] may be loued, bot not þouȝt. By loue may he be getyn & holden; bot bi þouȝt neiþer. & þerefore, þof al it be good sumtyme to þink of þe kyndnes & þe worþines of God in special, & þof al it be a liȝt & and a party of contemplacion: neuerþeles in þis werk it schal be casten down & keuerid wiþ a cloude of forȝetyng. & þou shalt step abouen it stalworþly, bot listely, wiþ a deuoute & a plesing stering of loue, & fonde for to peerse þat derknes abouen þee. & smyte apon þat þicke cloude of vnknowyng wiþ a scharp darte of longing loue, & go not þens for þing þat befallþ. (Hodgson 14)

The union between a man and his God thus entails a human willingness to rest in ignorance as well as to explore love, rather than reason, as a source of knowledge.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Prynne’s relationship to the Neo-Platonic and Hermetic traditions requires careful unraveling. The only attempt that has been made in this direction—Anthony Mellors’ *Late Modernist Poetics from Pound to Prynne*—is marred by an over-hasty impulse to condemn what Mellors considers “atavistic” tendencies in the Modernist tradition within which he locates Prynne. For instance, in a characteristic move, Mellors declares that “Prynne’s atavistic leanings appear to coincide with a more orthodox theological insistence.” But he then observes quite rightly that “Prynne constantly plays on the allusiveness of words and themes which can be read as having mystical importance and yet take on other secular connotations, so that there is no fixed sense of the loss or gain of the significant.” But in his eagerness to hold on to his earlier judgement about atavism, Mellors immediately changes his tack: “Ultimately, Prynne wants to get rid of ‘meaning’ altogether and replace it with a formal significance, which, through the indeterminate contingencies of poetic Saying, moves beyond them to reaffirm a hidden agenda of mystical return” (*Late Modernist Poetics* 147). The pressure upon that initial “ultimately” is tremendous, because it has to support the fragility of an argument that is constantly contradicted by its subject matter. Mellors’ treatment of Prynne’s interest in shamanism is similarly unsatisfactory, because here again he takes typical ‘postmodern’ Western postures of skepticism and postcolonialism, and discards Eliade in favor of more fashionable anthropologists like Taussig. Mellors argues that Prynne ultimately uses the magical realm as an ‘other’ to western rationalism, and seeks in it a reactionary alternative. Prynne’s use of terms like ‘divine sense,’ ‘truly’ and ‘pastorial nouns’ like “day,” “light,” and “sky” is presented as proof of his nostalgia for sense, truth, and magical return to origins. Mellors quotes the lines “the sky is our eternal / city and the whole beautiful and

The main problem with such an analysis, apart from its inevitable anachronism, is that if an attitude of loving submission without hankering for knowledge is indeed the way to a true and complete accord with the poem, then my own analysis of the lines from *Unanswering Rational Shore* implies that such a coherence is anyway not possible, however much I want it. There might be local strings of meaning that I can will into being, but this was only through a wilful bracketing of those elements of the poem that fell outside my scheme. In other words, Love could be a cosmic force of unification, but when it is channelled through individual desire, it can only be partially effective (if at all); incompleteness is, as Prynne points out in the Olson lecture, characteristic of the lyric condition. Completeness and homecoming can only be tropes in the lyric, whose identity is founded on the fragmented consciousness of the self. Thus Prynne's poems generally cooperate to an extent with the desiring reader, but beyond that, they signal their allegiance to resistance. Possession and union are quite out of the question here; the cloud will not be pierced.

Perhaps the most striking instance of resistance to possession is *Streak~~~Willing~~~Entourage Artesian* (2009), which is partly modelled on Solage's enigmatic rondeau "Fumeux fume par fume," a Medieval composition that extensively uses chromatic effects. We are informed beforehand of the connection through the epigraph, which quotes, with proper attribution, the lyrics of the rondeau. In fact, Prynne frequently uses epigraphs to indicate the general context of his otherwise disorienting

luminous trance / of it is smoke spreading / across into the upper air," commenting that "it would be hard to read lines such as these without the 'divine sense' recommending itself." What he fails to notice is the reference to the holocaust, the reduction of human beings into smoke, granting them, in Celan's words, "a grave in the sky." Smoke, a favored source of shamanistic trance and of the vertical ascent of the Christian soul, is also an index of European trauma. These lines certainly do not constitute a point where, according to Mellors, "contradiction is annulled"; contradiction is burningly alive with an urgency that precludes irony (Mellors 135).

texts; it is also a means of indicating the poem's loyalty to certain varieties of content that are not dependent on paraphrase for their semantic force. In

Streak~~~Willing~~~Entourage Artesian, for instance, the epigraph serves as a useful index for a technique of composition that seems, even by Prynne's standards, to be highly negligent towards the call for coherence. I will take up the opening quatrains that make up what might be the first 'poem'—the volume can be treated as a long poem or a sequence of untitled poems, one per page—to provide a sample of the material under discussion:

Inside tight closed box off it was it was out
a same summer box oh then at must closed on all
or maybe often maybe open to one side glaze be
in part to spill affirm parted along a rim ballast

Ready known, the same on over the way up be aim
superflux be finger fillip tight eddy cluster for
test the cover to seal better by close not closed
in her cone practice modify. To maul the out-sign

More at blanket turn, prior the blanket, over out
side did tear or torn smatter hot shut right off
tipping exclusion. Same day mainly deprive rank
service for service, at same hours total. Deeper

Fold to box to fill to undersell nor roving shame
spelled got hurt by a burn. Same too fast joined
by the flap cover trickle or stream cut solid then
cut your hand the close hand perfectly yours for.

Recital to side, same with to side livid in part
newly profuse did civic offer on a dial, sweep
flight oh disposal profligate buck more in and
ready. Tantric cube up tight seam, signal limit

Galvanic who will meet who would, as to camber
one side slipped over close fit: alter presume
that shutter way, his also servile blank package
the box befitted frank aside simulate by adoption. (1)

And here is the epigraph:

Fumeux fume par fume
fumeuse speculation.
Qu'antre fummet sa pensee
fumuex fume par fume.

Quar fumer molt li agree
tant qu'il ait son entencion.
Fumeux fume par fume
fumeuse speculation.

Based on the rather unique nature of Solage's piece, one could make specific formal observations about *Streak~~~Willing~~~Entourage Artesian*. The lyric form used by Solage is the rondeau (Solage, like most of his contemporaries, was both poet and composer),⁵⁸ which is built around just two rhymes and a fair amount of internal repetition.⁵⁹ The music is distinctive, since it uses extensive chromatism to create the effect of the "smoky speculation" that is the theme of the enigmatic lines. Chromatism involves musical phrases composed of "successive semitonic intervals" (Busby 58) which leads to dissonance; such phrases are also obviously very difficult to sing, since adjacent notes are not identical but only minimally differentiated. The music's preference for fine variation and reduced pitch rather than emphatic difference can be easily translated to Prynne's technique in this poem. Consider the first line from the passage quoted above:

⁵⁸ Solage was a prominent practitioner of the *Ars subtilior* style:

During the last quarter of the [fourteenth] century, this [14th century French] fondness for complication turned into something of an obsession. A group of composers active at such cultural centers as the courts of the schismatic antipope Clement VII at Avignon, Gaston Fébus of Foix in southwestern France, and Joan I of Aragón just across the Pyrenees came to revel (some would say exhaust themselves) in complexity. Once dubbed "mannerist," their style is now usually referred to as the *Ars subtilior* (subtle art). (Atlas 28)

See Dulong's "En Relisant Solage" for an study of the interaction between the poetry and the music.

⁵⁹ "This form, practiced particularly by Clement Marot, consists of 13 lines, octo- or decasyllables, divided into three stanzas of 5, 3, and 5 lines. The whole is constructed on two rhymes only, and the first word (-sound) or words of the first line are used as a *rentrement* (refrain), which occurs as the ninth and fifteenth lines, i.e. at the end of the second and third stanzas, and usually does not rhyme" (*New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* 1097).

“Inside tight closed box off it was it was out.” There is only one noun here: “box.” In a preliminary reading, therefore, the reader will probably tend to move quickly on to the next line, in the hope of acquiring more concrete information to build up a referential framework. However, if one sticks to the line in a demonstration of reader-constancy, rewards do present themselves. First, there seems to be some local drama afoot: something is premised to be “inside” a tightly closed box, but while this fact was being described, the occupant of the box seems to have escaped: “Off it was it was out.” The repetition suggests process here; the stammer of surprise, perhaps, at this breach of security. (Prynne has been interested in accidents arising from opened boxes at least since the 1999 *Triodes*, in which Pandora is a major figure). But it is also noteworthy that the repetition emphasizes words that are not usually stressed: the copula and the pronoun ‘it.’ It is as if the sentence wishes to call attention to its minor elements through a Steinian insistence. This tendency is visible in the rest of the section as well—the beginnings and endings of lines are very frequently marked out by ‘structural’ words such as prepositions and articles, along with the copula; the most prominent of these is the phrase “perfectly yours for,” followed by a period, which emphatically foregrounds the preposition (line 16).⁶⁰ Thus the chromatic lack of sharp differentiation is accompanied by a forced emphasis on what might go unnoticed, as if difference must be willed into being. The foregrounding of ‘to’ and ‘for’ in particular indicates a preoccupation with the dative, and therefore the indirect object of the poem’s intentional act: for whom/what does the poet come into being?

So it appears that the poem does encourage the reader to recognize certain qualities of Solage’s rondeau in it. Yet a formal analysis cannot entirely substitute for

⁶⁰ This is reminiscent of Stein’s striking one-line poem, “Roast potatoes for” (*Selected Writings* 490).

plunging into the content of the poem, whatever it might be. There are clues. One, for instance, is the color of the book's cover: it is a florescent green, very close to the green light that is produced when phosphorous is oxidized by the impact of radioactive elements. (John Armstrong suggests in his blog that the poem is a response to the Ulster riots that had recently taken place, in which case the green would indicate solidarity with Ireland. However, I'm not fully persuaded at this point that the entire poem is devoted to this theme.)⁶¹ There is at least one direct reference to radioactivity in the poem: on page 7 we find the word 'becquerel,' which is the unit for measuring radioactivity (besides being the name of the French physicist who discovered radioactivity along with Madame Curie). The other clue is a certain 'French' connection indicated both by the title and the epigraph. 'Entourage' and 'Artesian' are both words that retain clear traces of their French origins, the first through the retention of its 'French' pronunciation and the second through the fact that the earliest known 'artesian' wells were located in Artois in France. The preliminary conclusion might be that the poem seems to have something to say about radioactivity, an essentially French discovery.

The immediate occasion for this attention to radioactivity can be attributed to the contemporaneous interest in the Large Hadron Collider experiments that were about to begin in 2009. (They were scheduled to begin in 2008, but a helium leak led to a delay.)⁶² The experiments are being conducted by CERN in tunnels extending across the border between France and Switzerland. The Large Hadron Collider (LHC) is meant to provide experimental proof for the existence particularly of the Higgs boson, which would help to confirm the 'Standard Model' of the universe. Or, on the contrary, it might confirm an

⁶¹ See Armstrong's blog entry "J.H. Prynne from the Front."

extended version of the standard model based on the principle of supersymmetry, which essentially doubles the number of simple particles involved. Thus if the standard model requires six quarks, six leptons, four ‘force’ particles that correspond to the four forces that operate between these quarks and leptons (all of which have been experimentally proven to exist) plus the mysterious Higgs boson, the ‘supersymmetry model’ will have another set of ‘SUSY’ (short for ‘supersymmetry’) particles that correspond to these, but with spins that correspond to bosons or force particles. These hypothetical SUSY particles are represented symbolically by introducing a tilde over the symbol for the standard model particle. Thus the symbol for an electron is ‘e,’ while its counterpart, the ‘selectron,’ is represented by ‘ \tilde{e} .’ The same applies to the other ‘sleptons,’ and ‘squarks,’ as well as to the force particles. If Prynne is indeed engaging with cutting-edge physics here, as he probably is, then the significance of the tildes in the title would be obvious: they represent particles that are, for the moment, purely hypothetical, and waiting, perhaps, to be willed into being by the collider. The tripling of the tildes can then parallel the three generations of particles in the standard model, or the mysterious tendency of quarks to appear as triads.

It is very likely that Prynne, who has taken an active and almost professional interest in developments in science, would have been interested in the highly-publicized developments at the Franco-Swiss border. Apart from the title and the cover, the first ‘poem’ in the sequence contains several references to particle physics: for instance, Prynne’s use of the word “smatter” reminds us that that the SUSY particles are

⁶² See, among others, the *Telegraph* story “Large Hadron Collider Setback after Helium Leak in One of Magnets” by Richard Alleyne.

collectively called “smatter”⁶³ The close proximity of the words “cone” and “cluster” invokes the two types of algorithms used to track proton beams in the Collider—“cone algorithms” and “cluster algorithms.”⁶⁴ The reference to “superflux,” one of the definitions of which is “[a]n overflowing, or excessive flow, of water or other liquid” (OED), might indicate not only the spontaneous upsurge of water in an artesian well, but also the process of superconduction. The LHC uses superconducting magnets to produce the strong electric fields required to accelerate the particles; they can function only in extremely low temperatures, which are maintained through liquid helium (the same material which leaked from the vacuum-sealed (boxed?) environment of the collider): the reference to getting “hurt by a burn” suggests the sensitivity of these magnets to rises in temperature.⁶⁵ Prynne is also sensitive to the destructive aspect of nuclear physics, of course: the references to ‘ballast’ and ‘cone,’ along with ‘maul’ and ‘hurt by burn’ imply the presence of destructive projectiles that are also based on the same fundamental insight about the divisibility of the atom and the force fields that hold its components together. In other news, one might add that oil wells are also artesian wells, in the sense that the relative pressures of the rock strata push the oil out through the oil well.

It would be impossible to claim, however, that the poem is primarily about the Collider; there are far too many allusive strands active here, many of which lead to knowledge-pools that are not immediately accessible to non-specialists. Despite the

⁶³ Gordon Kane defines “smatter” as the “superpartners of the Standard Model particles” (*Supersymmetry* 188).

⁶⁴ See, for instance, Barker 72-73.

⁶⁵ An extremely helpful layman’s introduction to the LHC is *The Quantum Frontier: The Large Hadron Collider* by Don Lincoln. It provides an overview of the basic physical concepts as well as a detailed description of the structure and functioning of the collider itself. See pages 75-78 for a description of the magnets and the liquid-helium-based cooling mechanism.

musical reference, there is nothing particularly ‘lyrical’ that can create a sense of beauty distinct from meaning. But the poem nevertheless does not present itself as entirely antisocial: the meticulously documented epigraph, the classical symmetry of the quatrains, and the shadows of local sense and social implication that flit across the opaque glare of the poem, indicate the poem’s awareness of its socially mediated existence. The fact that it presents itself as a public object, even if only within the circuit of small-press publication, cannot be denied. Its desire for its own internal logic of self-realization and self-possession seems mostly to be at odds, however, with its minimally-conceded desire for the reader. Indeterminacy does not seem integral to the poem as such—since it gives the impression of knowing exactly what it is doing—though it would almost certainly be part of the reader’s experience of the poem. This highly uneven distribution of power in the relationship between reader and text might indeed be part of an authoritarian poetics, as Charles Bernstein suspects.⁶⁶ But it might also be a reflection of a similarly uneven relationship between the poem and its medium.

I will examine Prynne’s conception of poetic language in the following chapter in some detail, but here I will address just one aspect of it in order to complicate this issue of authority a little further. The 2008 essay titled “Huts” indicates that Prynne takes issue with Heidegger’s portrayal of language as the refuge of Being. The piece begins as an apparently unmotivated enquiry into what Collins means by the word “hut” in “Ode to Evening,” but quickly intensifies into an exploration not only of the modern-day huts of refugees and watchtowers of high-security prisons, but also of the log cabin in the Black Forest from which Heidegger theorized language as the “house” and “temple” of Being. From this highly-charged matrix, he arrives at the conclusion that language is not “the

⁶⁶ See footnote 7 in this chapter.

house of Being” as Heidegger would have liked it to be, but is at best a hut—a transient and partial shelter:

Because the primal hut strips away a host of circumstantial appurtenances and qualifications, it does represent an elemental form, a kind of sweat-lodge; but it is confederate with deep ethical problematics, and not somehow a purifying solution to them. Yet the hut presents always a possible aspiration towards innocence, residual or potential, and towards transformation, so that a cynical report would be equally in error. [...] The house of language is a primal hut, is stark and is also necessary, and not permanent. (631)

This refusal to either accept or deny the sanctuary of language is typical of Prynne’s fundamentally dialectical approach.⁶⁷ Particularly important is the fact that for Prynne, language cannot be trusted as the guarantor of the poem’s truth: the much-vaunted fidelity to the medium, which has been frequently advanced to explain the difficulties of twentieth-century art, is thus no guarantee for authenticity in the case of the linguistic artifact. Language is both refuge and homelessness; it is founded on trust and yet is the site of constant betrayal. The certainties of poetic form and the ingenuities of poetic artifice are pitted, then, against the overwhelming intractability of language as such: its failure to become the pure, unsullied ‘materiality’ through which authentic meaning can be accessed. Control can be simulated precisely because it is produced in and addressed to a condition that prohibits it. Authority can be assumed because the author can never really be the ‘author’ in the first place: Prynne’s own extensive borrowings from other writers signal metonymically the larger condition of inauthenticity imposed by language. In other words, if the metaphor of love is to be sustained, we would have to think less in terms of a simple reader-poem couple, and more in terms of a love triangle involving the

⁶⁷ To read the difficulty a foundational mourning and negativity would therefore be quite mistaken: while obviously conversant with Adorno’s position, it is Heidegger—despite, or perhaps because of his flirtation with Nazism—that Prynne tends to cite in his lectures and essays, including “Resistance and Difficulty.” I take up these issues in greater detail in chapter 4.

poem, the reader and language, where the unrequited love of the poem/poet towards language is mirrored by the reader's own frustrations in relation to the poem. Here Love is not antithetical to Strife but in fact includes it.

If the reader expects the formal coherence of the poem to translate into semantic transparency, she fails to recognize the structure before her as a mere "hut" rather than a permanent edifice. The fact that *Streak~~~Willing~~~Entourage Artesian* begins with references to boxes is, in this context, an indication of the poem's own homelessness: not only do boxes feature prominently during a shift of residence, but the word 'box' also means a temporary shelter. According to the OED, "box" can signify "A box-like shelter; a hut, or small house"; more specifically, "A place of shelter for one or more men; as a sentry's, signalman's, or watchman's box; a sportsman's hiding-place while shooting." In other words, it is exactly the kind of morally ambiguous shelter that Prynne discusses in "Huts."⁶⁸ Quite apart from the question of whether the box stands for a packing case, Pandora's box, the Large Hadron Collider, or a prison cell for rioters in the internal thematic networks of the poem, the reference to the box points to a meta-poetic lack of faith in the durability of language as construction material.

In the case of Prynne's difficulty, therefore, the reader's desire for coherence and her need to affirm the condition of love can never be directed towards the poem alone, because the poem's own gaze is fixed towards language and the world as it is mediated through language. If the reader dares to use the rhetoric of love in her address to the poem, then that rhetoric must be directed towards an entire condition, whose temporary point of origin is the encounter of the reader with the poem as a linguistic artifact. It is

⁶⁸ John Armstrong notes this meaning of the word "box," but he does not relate it to the "Huts" essay because of his preoccupation with his theory that the poem is a response to the Ulster riots.

not accidental that in engaging with Prynne's poems, one is forced, by the very act of friendship, to confront the hubris of that act, and to struggle to claim reality for it by trying to match the poem's almost incredible inclusivity. And ultimately, the reader must affirm the genuineness of love by disengaging it not from knowledge but from possession, and to see in this gesture something other than loss. To this extent, Prynne's remarks on the unspecified "they" in Shakespeare's sonnet 94 and Wyatt's "They Fle from Me" is applicable to his poetry as well:

Vicariously, this persistence in not telling the full tale is passed on to the excluded reader [...] as an imputed trial of loyalty to the task of such impersonality, imposed upon the most closely personal things, is to be endured by proxy without self-important fret or interpretative self-interest: an end-position to be adopted, maybe, only at the end of efforts honourably to do otherwise. (*They That Have Pow're to Hurt* 3)

Thus the occlusions in the personal pronoun might be a demand for the reader to share the hidden hurt of the implied speaker by effacing her own personhood that must necessarily assert itself in the process of textual interpretation. Not knowing is to be endured, and endured indefinitely, as a profession of loyalty to (the poem? language? to all that exists without explaining itself? The hanging preposition that points towards nothing and everything might indeed be the appropriate conclusion for this sentence). Yet this is a readerly attitude that Prynne recommends only as a last resort, once all possibilities of "honourably" engaging with the poem at the level of interpretation have been exhausted.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ It might be noted that Prynne's analysis of renaissance love poetry can be extended to twentieth-century contexts in which similar social restraints or private hurt push writing into the zone of difficulty.⁶⁹ The difficulty of Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes, for instance, has often been attributed to a tendency to pass on private feeling and suffering to the reader as a textual experience. The paradoxes of late-twentieth century individualism, which enforces with increasing rigidity the privatization and homogenization of consciousness, can turn difficulty into a mode of imagining-into-being an alternative version of privacy that can tolerate social sharing without being absorbed into the hurtful paradigms of possession and use. Rosenheim's "cryptographic imagination" might then be part of a subterranean "resistance" of an imperiled

Coda

This is a partial explanation for the fact that Prynne has increasingly tended to ironize the figure of the reader-as-detective, who assiduously hunts down allusions and references under the expert supervision of the author. In his most recent book *Kazoo Dreamboats* (2011), he shouts out from amidst a thicket of cross-disciplinary and multi-lingual references: “you get triple / points if you guess the connection” (7-8). Though disheartening to inveterate decrypters and detectives, the poem’s satirical attitude towards reading projects propped up by reward-schemes is valid at a time when, as Prynne says in a note in *To Pollen* (2006), even “Terror may already be priced into values.”⁷⁰ However, *Kazoo Dreamboats* is at the same time quite unique in Prynne’s oeuvre, since this book, more than any other work, is written with an acute awareness both of its occasion and its audience. The volume was released on 27 November 2011 at Lady Mitchell Hall that had been occupied by student protesters as part of the Cambridge Defend Education campaign; Prynne read out parts of the poem to the assembled protesters.⁷¹ The book is thus highly sympathetic to acts of resistance inspired by the Arab Spring, with which Prynne connects the various Occupy movements in the United States and elsewhere. Yet

selfhood, as I have suggested in chapter 1. An “honourable” response to such poetry, short of mute suffering, might be presented in Prynne’s own readerly practice as exemplified in his reading of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 94, Wordsworth’s “Solitary Reaper,” and most recently, George Herbert’s “Love III.” Prynne’s general method has been to offer meticulous close-readings that employ the full weight of his erudition and empathetic power without making overarching arguments about the poem: local observations and theorizations do abound, however, as my quotations indicate.

⁷⁰ This note does not appear in the text of the poem but in a loose sheet of paper included in copies given by Prynne to friends “with the author’s compliments.” My profuse thanks to Kate Wheale for sharing her copy with me.

he appears to valorize actions that do not carry rewards or even goals:⁷² the first stanza of the poem obliquely insists on acts not based on rewards: “Could be / joined at promise confection with or without, don’t wait yet do / what cannot pass with or without don’t wait yet do what cannot pass / up to its end” (5). The confections or desserts of acts are optional; it is the doing that seems necessary and urgent. For the reader of difficult poetry, then, the question of why the reader should take the trouble interlocks with the problem of imagining intransitive action that is dissociated from traditional regimes of rewards and goals, but which presents itself as an urgent affirmation of a potential for action that might not (as yet) have meaningful or efficacious avenues of expression.⁷³

⁷¹ The announcement of Prynne’s reading can be found at the Cambridge Reading Series website: <<http://crs0hq.tumblr.com/>>. For Prynne’s statement supporting student protests, see “Statement from J.H. Prynne on the Disruption of Willetts’s Talk.”

⁷² Compare Simon Jarvis’s observation: “For Prynne, [...] hermeneutic difficulty is imagined less like a non-referential bonanza for the reader than it is like a potentially fair exchange. The texts are said to ‘count the cost’ of what they live off, but implicitly also to count the cost of a reader’s work and to repay it” (“Soteriology and Reciprocity” 31). My comments should indicate that even this model doesn’t fully capture the economy of Prynne’s later poetry: repayment is not a major concern in the later work.

⁷³ This is why Prynne is not unhappy with the fact that Occupy movements don’t have leaders and explicitly articulated goals. He says in a letter written around the same time as he wrote *Kazoo Dreamboats*: “Everyone bleats off saying that the Occupy movements aren’t serious, don’t have any coherent ideas, have no positive understanding of important issues. We hear a lot of that over in the UK, too. Of course this is rather amazing and paltry. Very large numbers of mostly modest citizens have come out of their passive shells and affirmed nothing more nor less than utter distaste for the current political and economic machines that supposedly regulate our lives. Unlike formal revolution, which has leaders and defined purpose, this is revulsed protest on a massive scale. The sense of it is not in articulate aims or ideas, but in the sheer fact of the numbers, the tidal waves of emerging intuitive refusal to accept the control frame of social order imposed on the freedoms of human life. (Letter to the Croatoan Poetry Cell)”

CHAPTER 4

DIFFICULTY AND COMPLICITY

Difficult art has often been portrayed by artists and critics as inherently ethical: as perhaps even the exemplary mode of ethical practice. To the extent that art is non-representational, its lost social immediacy is compensated by its reinstatement as ethical portent. Towards the end of the twentieth century, the notion of “poethics”¹ has been singularly popular among poststructuralist thinkers: following Heidegger’s lead, poetry is repeatedly asserted to have special privileges because the relatively recent ‘linguistic’ twists and turns of philosophy tend towards what has always been the ground state of poetry: poetry must, therefore, always anticipate the insights of philosophy if only on account of having acquired a head start. Exported by philosophers to the realms of the unutterable ‘limits’ of being and knowing, poetic difficulty is frozen as permanent and exalted enigma. Gerald Bruns remarks, for instance:

[T]he ancients typically regarded poetry as an instance of the dark saying, the *ainigma*, a word that sometimes gets translated as “riddle,” but unlike a riddle the enigma’s darkness is not something that can be illuminated, or eliminated, by reason or interpretation. It is not a puzzle whose solution justifies its formulation but is opaque in the nature of the case, and to that extent it defines the limits of the discursive regions that we inhabit. (*On the Anarchy of Poetry and Philosophy* 177)

Even my brief discussion of the term in chapter 1 should make it obvious that Bruns somewhat overstates the case: the word ‘enigma’ in its Greek usage did include the less heroic riddle, which does not offer *the* limit but an ephemeral simulation of the limit. Such grand generalizations, while ostensibly meant to grant poetry priority over

¹ Joan Retallack’s *The Poethical Wager* defines ‘poethics’ as “what we make of events as we use language in the present, how we continuously create an ethos of the way in which events are understood” (9). Gerald

philosophy, end up relegating poetry to an idealized performance of mystic darkness. If contemporary continental philosophy succeeds best when it recognizes its own implication in harm, it frequently exempts poetry and art from the obligations of fallenness.²

It is here that the case for the unethicity of difficult poetry might be useful in keeping alive poetry's status as a socially engaged, historically contingent, and essentially fallible enterprise. Ashbery's uncertainty about the rightness of his own enigmatic devices is also an acknowledgment of poetry's existence in a socially-determined moral universe. His deliberate use of kitsch elements, for instance, emphasizes poetry's distance from and desire to participate in an openly complicit 'popular culture' that is viewed by aestheticians and aesthetes with horror. The poets' role as visionary and legislator, as a fabricator of possible worlds through their superior understanding of language, is under severe duress in such instances of poetic slumming, as it were. One of the most equivocal articulations of this skepticism about the purity of poetry can be seen in Allen Ginsberg's "Wichita Vortex Sutra" (1966). Ginsberg's sense of the poet as visionary is unique in Post-World-War-II poetry. But unlike *Howl*, which spoke for the denizens of an alienated subculture who were victims rather than active participants of that society, "Wichita Vortex Sutra" is far less certain about the existence of enclaves of innocence. Part found object and part created artifact, the poem fully acknowledges the ways in

Bruns in his essay "Poethics," and later Matthew Jenkins in *Poetic Obligation: Ethics in American Experimental Poetry since 1945*, both also use the term with similar implications.

² Consider, for example, Paul Bové's concluding remarks in *Poetry against Torture*:

Those ideas the reader finds in texts, words, and experience—which the reader cannot properly forget—are the poem's creation of and responsibility to the real. Criticism's responsibility to poetry's achievement of the human as such a being is its highest civilizational task. [...] A polity that tortures is a polity that regresses, that debauches, and that abandons conservatism for the radicalism of reversion. Against all of it, criticism sets its alliance with the poetic, with history, and with the best the species has made of itself. (Bové 136)

which language serves to justify and support war—in this case, the Vietnam War. After presenting the ways in which war is legitimized through public speech-acts, the poem comes to its central insight:

The war is language,
language abused
for Advertisement
language used
like magic for power on the planet (*Selected Poems* 165).

This “Black Magic,” as Ginsberg calls it (165), is then countered with a corrective act of ‘white’ magic via language in a performance of poetry’s ancient vatic power:

I lift my voice aloud,
make Mantra of American language now,
I here declare the end of the War! (*Selected Poems* 171)

If language is susceptible to misuse, a sacred use of it is also possible. At the very least, such attempts to exorcise language dilute the thickened and static language-zones that congeal around the wound of its entry into the arena of war.

Yet both Ashbery and Ginsberg ultimately trust language when it is subjected to the poetic impulse. Ashbery’s willingness to submit to language-machines like the sestina or the villanelle and his openness towards the ‘mysteriousness’ of language, and Ginsberg’s impulse poetically and magically to rescue an abused language, both indicate a general willingness to distinguish between language in general and poetic language as a special and privileged case of language-use. George Oppen, whose status as an authentically political poet gives him a unique place in twentieth-century American poetry, expresses a more guarded optimism about the possibility of rescuing language from history:

Possible
To use

Words provided one treat them
As enemies.
Not enemies — Ghosts
Which have run mad
In the subways
And of course the institutions
And the banks. If one captures them
One by one proceeding
Carefully they will restore
I hope to meaning
And to sense. (*Selected Poems* 116)

This hope in reinstalling language from its current state as the enemy to a condition of rationality is severely reduced in the work of a poet like W.S. Graham, whose general attitude towards language is one of wryly mirthful and affectionate antagonism:

These words as I uttered them
Spoke back at me out of spite,
Pretended to not know me
From Adam. Sad to infer
Such graft and treachery in the name
Of communication. (*Implements in Their Places* 70)

Or again:

Language, you terrible surrounder
Of everything, what is the good
Of me isolating my few words
In a certain order to send them
Out in a suicide torpedo to hit?
I ride it. I will never know. (*Implements in Their Places* 71)

The pervasiveness of language makes any individual linguistic artifact merely a subset of an all-encompassing totality that works on logics of recognition and misrecognition that might coincide only accidentally with individual motive. The irony of Graham's dialogue with language is that it is itself constituted by language, so that even as the speaker and the spoken word are separated through an imputed enmity, the distinction dissolves back into unity as the 'surrounding' language seeps in.

In Graham this battle of wills between poet and language is mostly devoid of historical context; it points rather to a perpetual contradiction inherent in the poetic act. But for a number of Postmodernist poets, the problem of negotiating language often implies confronting the complicity of language in acts of collectively sanctioned violence. The degree of this sense of complicity and the hopefulness about a poetic reconfiguration of language varies, and this variation is directly linked also to the question of poetic difficulty. If the resistance of language to the intentions of its users is not viewed merely as an idiosyncrasy but also as an intimation of the accumulated strata of history that limit the flexibility of language, then poetic difficulty must be seen as both a development of innate artifactual possibilities in poetry and as a deliberate counterattack upon the excesses of language and the collectivity it mediates. Thus in addition to traditional political poetry that opposes war, we find a class of highly difficult poems that claim to be opposed to the various social ills as represented and created through language.

Though my focus is on British and American poetry, it would be impossible to proceed in this line of enquiry without addressing the work of Paul Celan. Celan's importance for late-twentieth-century theorizations of poetic complicity can hardly be exaggerated. As a Romanian Jew and Holocaust survivor who wrote what is considered by many to be the most important German-language poetry after Rilke and Trakl, Celan's life and work were packed with contradictions. In one of his earliest poems, written during the Second World War, Celan asks his mother who had loved German literature and had been shot in a concentration camp: "Und duldest du, Mutter, wie einst, ach, daheim, / den leisen, den deutschen, den schmerzlichen Reim?" ["And can you bear, Mother, as once on a time, / the gentle, the German, the pain-laden rhyme?"] (*Selected*

Poetry and Prose 10, 11).³ In the 1958 Bremen speech, however, Celan declares his confidence in the survival of the German language despite all that it had undergone:

It, the language, remained, not lost, yes in spite of everything. But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through frightful muting, pass through the thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech. It passed through and gave back no words for that which happened; yet it passed through this happening. Passed through and could come to light again, “enriched” by all this. (*Selected Poetry and Prose* 395)

The irony of the word placed within scare quotes notwithstanding, Celan’s hopefulness is real, at least at this point in his career, twelve years before his suicide. Wounded but still alive, both the language and the poet have to continue in the face of the absurdity of their camaraderie. But the darkness that language has passed through crystallizes for Celan as a general and perennial tendency of poetry towards darkness.

In his notes to the famous “Meridian” speech, Celan describes what he calls the “constitutive, congenital darkness” (“konstitutive, kongenitale Dunkelheit”) of all poetry in terms of its participation in the world via language:

Mit andern Worten: das Gedicht kommt dunkel zur Welt; es kommt, als Ergebnis radikaler Individuation, als ein Stück Sprache zur Welt, somit, d.h. sofern Sprache Welt zu sein vermag, mit Welt befrachtet. [...] Es gibt diesseits und jenseits von Esoterik, Hermetik u.ä. eine Dunkelheit des Gedichts. Auch das exoterische, auch das offenste Gedicht [...] hat seine Dunkelheit, hat sie als Gedicht [...]. (*Der Meridian* 84)

[In other words: the poem is born dark; it comes, as the result of a radical individuation, into the world as a piece of language, thus, i.e. as far as language manages to be world, laden with world. [...] There exists on this and on the far side of all esotericism, hermeticism, et cetera, a darkness of the poem. Even the most exoteric, the most [...] open poem [...] has its darkness, has it qua poem [...]. (*Meridian* 84)]⁴

³ John Felstiner’s translations are not very satisfactory, but his is currently the most inclusive bilingual edition of Celan’s poetry. These lines are from the poem “Nähe der Gräben,” composed between 1940 and 1943.

⁴ The English text is from Pierre Joris’ translation, which follows the pagination of the German.

This is an admirable pre-wording of what George Steiner calls “ontological difficulty” (see chapter 1) as an expression of a fundamental ‘darkness.’ (The reason for Steiner’s decision to use Celan’s work as the prime instance of ontological difficulty should now be evident.) Celan experimented with the related Latinate word ‘opacity’ (*Opazität*) in his drafts (*Der Meridian* 96) but in the final version he stayed with the unequivocally Germanic ‘Dunkelheit,’ enacting his insight that the question of language and its implication in the world entails an inevitable and necessary complicity. Celan’s own ambivalence towards ‘hermetic poetry,’ amongst which his own work was usually shelved in critical circles, is a clear context for these remarks: he inscribed in the copy of *Die Niemandsrose* he gifted to his translator Michael Hamburger the phrase “Ganz und gar hermetisch” (“Absolutely not hermetic”) (*Poems of Paul Celan* xxix). Indeed, hermeticism and esotericism imply prior possession of that which is concealed, whereas in Celan, there is a distinct sense in which meaning and communication can only be hoped for: they are markedly unavailable for ownership or concealment.

For Celan, the opacity of the world is constitutive of the poem, but the poem must also in turn envoice this darkness. In “Sprich Auch Du” from *Von Schwell zu Schwell* (1955), the word “Schatte” indicates this originary shadow that must be coaxed into speech. The poem is addressed to an ambiguous “du”; the poem or poet might be addressing themselves or each other; or the addressee might be the ‘other’ that Celan’s poetry ceaselessly seeks to address into being. The second stanza introduces the notion of shadow:

Sprich—
 Doch scheide das Nein nicht vom Ja.
 Gib deinem Spruch auch den Sinn:
 gib ihm den Schatten. (*Poems of Paul Celan* 68)

And a stanza later, "Wahr spricht, wer Schatten spricht" (68). This *Schattensprache*, or 'shadowspeech' can sustain and survive the essential unity of contradictions: of affirmation and negation, and of life and death, as he observes later on in the poem. It is the mode of speaking that tends towards a silence that is not unrelated to, but also not dependent upon, the difficulties of artifice:

It is true, the poem, the poem today, shows—and this has only indirectly to do with the difficulties of vocabulary, the faster flow of syntax or a more awakened sense of ellipsis, none of which we should underrate—the poem clearly shows a strong tendency towards silence. (*Collected Prose* 48)

The context of the word 'today' in this sentence is left unspoken, but this is the gap through which history silently enters the analysis. The 'stringencies' of artifice⁵ themselves tend to entrap the communicative act within a speech-grid that is fascinated by its own constructedness, but the poem's silence, which is also its impossibility, is part of the temptation of the poem to self-destruct in extreme solidarity with the non-human world that can be accessed fully only through death.⁶ For poetry, the closest

⁵ I am quoting Prynne here; see my analysis of the essay "Resistance and Difficulty" in chapter 3, pp. 111-115.

⁶ It has been suggested that darkness (or obscurity in the etymological sense) is strongly related to the negative sonic experience of silence. In *Nonverbal Communication across Disciplines*, Fernando Poyatos points out a series of literary examples that associate darkness and silence, including the following from Dickens' *Bleak House*: "Upon this wintry night it is so still, that listening to the intense silence is like looking at intense darkness [...] all is heavier than before" (Poyatos 293). The thematic of darkness and light that pervades Celan's poems is analogous to the problem of silence and envoicing that pushes his poetry relentlessly towards the abyss of self-annihilation. Though far from the cloistered and introspective silences of medieval Catholic monasteries, poets in the industrialized West have used silence as an important aesthetic stance. As Susan Sontag argues, an aesthetic of silence is very close to an aesthetic of difficulty, since difficulty is the closest positive approximation to the pure negativity of silence:

The exemplary modern artist's choice of silence isn't often carried to this point of final simplification, so that he becomes literally silent. More typically, he continues speaking, but in a manner that his audience can't hear. Most valuable art in our time has been experienced by audiences as a move into silence (or unintelligibility or invisibility or inaudibility); a dismantling of the artist's competence, his responsible sense of vocation—and therefore as an aggression against them.

Modern art's chronic habit of displeasing, provoking, or frustrating its audience can be regarded as a limited, vicarious participation in the ideal of silence which has been elevated as a prime standard of seriousness in the contemporary scene. (Sontag)

approximation to death is a retreat into its own materiality as language and artifice, where it enacts the strange and estranging life of the automaton.

Yet this “dunkle Lyrik” or “dark lyric”⁷ is not merely an implosion of poetry into its own medium, a death-wish culminating in pure materiality. Instead, in his Bremen speech, Celan calls his poetry, along with all poetry, “essentially dialogue” (*Selected Poetry and Prose* 396). His poems are often in the form of a dialogue with an unidentified companion, and sometimes with explicitly declared personae, as in the chilling “Tenebrae,” where the addressee is the Christian God. This necessary doubling can ultimately be an appeal to the ‘Other’ that Celan describes his poems as seeking. If Celan’s difficult and dark poetry is in fact a direct response to the experience of the Nazi regime, then the problem of communication has to be solved not at the level of language itself, but at the level of language as it enacts its inherent sociality. This insight is not limited to holocaust poetry and other aesthetic responses to historical trauma. As a matter of fact, most moments of acute self-reflexivity in language exhibit this dialogic mode exactly when they themselves as almost entirely indifferent to historical context. To return to the two chronically self-reflexive poets discussed earlier: Ashbery’s “Paradoxes and Oxymorons” is a brilliant example of poetry talking about itself and in the same breath, as it were, talking to an imagined other; W.S. Graham’s work, which sometimes shows striking similarities to Ashbery’s self-reflexive mode, is also mostly directed

Sontag’s analysis is almost entirely restricted to aesthetics in isolation from politics and ethics, issues that artists are supposed to be mostly indifferent towards as they strive for artistic perfection. Thus even though she usefully connects difficulty and silence, she is unable to relate them to the notion of an experienced impossibility, which is primarily, though not exclusively, an effect of the social location of art. The craftsmanly work of poetic artifice and its own demands upon attentiveness might indeed promise an elite realm of artistic experimentation, but when the substrate of craft is language, the world cannot but intrude and make its own demands, including the cessation of work. As Celan rightly points out, poetry as language is laden with world; so is silence.

⁷ Zschachlitz 35 and passim.

towards an addressee despite its preoccupation with questions of medium rather than of message. The tendency of poetic self-reflexivity to express itself in terms of an irresolvable dualism suggests that self-consciousness is in itself the provocation for community.

In Celan, the relationship between reader and poem is mediated by the image of spectatorship or ‘witnessing,’ which is a reminder of the role of language and memory as public record. The failure of language is partly the failure to bear witness to history, but its ultimate failure is to bear false witness. In the 1967 *Atemwende*, we find a powerful expression of the poem’s defeat when he refers to

das hundert-
züngige Mein-
gedicht, das Genicht (*Breathturn* 94)

Pierre Joris translates these lines as follows: “my hundred- / tongued perjury- / poem, the noem” (95). Joris explains that he translated ‘Meingedicht’ as ‘perjury-poem’ because he believes that Celan’s neologism “is based analogically on the German word ‘Meineid,’ a false oath, perjury” (*Breathturn* 257). The appearance of the word ‘Zeugnis’ (‘testimony,’ ‘witness’) as the poem’s very last word indicates that the poem does function within a framework of socially responsible speech that is not dialogue—as in conversation—but the more formal and abstractly dialogical act of bearing witness. While the poem represents the negation of its own task (hence the other neologism of ‘Genicht,’ a compression of ‘Gedicht’ (poem) and ‘nicht’ (not))—the possibility of true speech is kept alive in an unnamed ‘du’: “Tief / in der Zietenschrunde, / beim / Wabeneis / wartet, ein Atemkristall, / dein unumstößliches / Zuegnis” (*Breathturn* 94). “[Y]our unalterable testimony” is what redeems the perjury of Celan’s non-poem or as Joris translates it,

‘noem.’ The poem’s falsity—its complicity, we might say—in untruth is made bearable by locating the truth in the domain of the other, of the unspecified ‘du.’ Dialogue is therefore essential for the moral survival of Celan’s poetry, which has to locate its consolations, like its meanings, elsewhere.

Celan’s dialogic model of poetry might be fruitfully applied to a poet like J.H. Prynne, for whom, as I have argued in chapter 3, an unresolved duality is central. Indeed, Celan’s model might be seen as a supplement or even rival to the explicitly political model of the dialectic that I proposed in chapter 3 via Mao’s early writings. Though Mao is certainly influential by Prynne’s own account, the particularly bleak dialogic—and as Prynne understands the term, this could very well be substituted with the word ‘dialectical’—structure of much of Celan’s poetry can in fact constitute a more useful template for poetic practice. The tensions between the interiority of the dark lyric and its intense worries about its social being, which it cannot extricate from its linguistic being, is a shared concern for both Celan and Prynne, and indeed for most other lyric poets: as I have argued in chapter 2, even an a-political poet like Ashbery must engage indirectly with the question of ethics. As I have suggested, a complicitous art might be more empowered than an idealized and innocent art, but an explicit engagement with the zone of socio-political fallibility is a perilous enterprise. Yet it must be undertaken as a completion of the principle of artifice or manu-facture: as Celan points out, the hand that crafts the poem and the hand that proffers the handshake are the same.⁸

⁸ One of Celan’s important statements on his own poetry also illuminates a usually-overlooked heteronomous aspect of artifice. When confronted with the charge of plagiarism in 1960, Celan wrote to his editor Hans Bender: “Craft—that is a matter of hands. And these hands belong in turn to *one person* only. . . . Only true hands write true poems. I see no basic distinction between a handshake and a poem” (qtd. by Felstiner in *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* 155). Poetry is first compared to manual labor, and then equated with the ultimate occidental gesture of social being: the shaking of hands—an avowal of trust made necessary by the imperative to lay down one’s arms and work with, rather than against, fellow human

Complicity and Lyric Poetry

A 2007 collection of essays on contemporary British poetry was titled *Complicities: British Poetry 1945-2007*. The term is explained briefly in the prefatory note by the editors Robin Purves and Sam Ladkin: “Much of the work gathered here knows language, consciousness and culture to be profoundly complicit across the board in the extension of acts of domination, from the preparation for and execution of war to the composition of the suicide note, from the overt corruption of the democratic franchise to cold calling’s interpellation of the human subject as consumer-in-waiting” (Purves 2-3). Similarly, Jerome McGann has recently declared that “the artist and writer is always complicit and must be so” (“Modernity and Complicity” 208). Johanna Drücker, with whom McGann was in conversation when he made this remark, published *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* in 2005. It appears that the intensification of ethical concerns in the late-twentieth century, particularly after the Iraq War, has brought into relief the notion of complicity as a viable aesthetic concept.

Steven Shaviro’s eloquent description of the problem of complicity can be taken as a provisional starting point here: “Complicity is the wound which disturbs thought’s (or language’s) claim to self-sufficiency; it is the Outside which provokes and necessitates thought without for all that making itself available to thought” (Shaviro 831). Described in this way, complicity can be read as the socio-political analogue of resistance as Prynne defines the term (Shaviro’s use of the word ‘wound’ is a happy coincidence, and perhaps

beings. Celan’s proof of his sincerity is the synecdoche of the hands that belong to one person alone, and with which he creates poems and affirms his good faith as a social being. The artisanal aspect of poetry, which is often interpreted as its most introverted moment, is at the same time its most truthful and socially responsible moment. Also recall Ashbery’s interest in Parmigianino’s hands in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*.

more). The “claim to self-sufficiency” has been nowhere more strident than in twentieth-century art, which has built up an array of practices and theoretical formulations that validate and reinforce that claim. Though art’s claim to autonomy might be read as in fact the most emphatic affirmation of the ‘Outside’ or the ‘Other,’ it is also useful to think of complicity as that which cannot be thought out or controlled but presents us with an experience of resistance to notions of goodness based on the purity of individual acts. Thus, when difficulty is transferred from the epistemic and ontological paradigms to social and pragmatic modes of being, the source of resistance can be located not merely in the ‘otherness’ of one’s fellow human beings, but also in the notion of the social itself, which includes but exceeds or marginalizes individual morality and purity of intent. It is then possible to imagine a poem’s difficulty increasing in direct proportion to the leaching of the experience of subjective agency into a social sphere inimical to individual desire. The unavailability of meaning can then represent the non-coincidence of our individual and collective beings.

The notion of complicity has a rich philosophical pedigree in the twentieth century, of course, and its insights parallel the appearance of some of the best products of Modernism in the gallery of complicitous art and thought. Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” completed in 1940 (the year of his suicide to avoid capture by Nazis), astutely points out the contradiction that would become fully visible only in the aftermath of the Second World War. According to Benjamin, art objects “have an origin which [the materialist philosopher] cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of

civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (*Illuminations* 256).

The task of transforming this general observation about the products of culture into a response to the horror of the extermination of Jews and other minorities in Europe was left to fellow Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno, who, unlike Benjamin, survived the war.

At first glance, Adorno seems to be more interested in abolishing poetry as such rather than reimagining aesthetics through the experience of guilt. His famous prohibition against lyric poetry after Auschwitz emerged immediately after Celan published his first collection (which contained the celebrated “Todesfuge”) and Adorno’s comments have been read as a direct response to Celan’s early work. In concluding the essay “Cultural Criticism and Society” (1951), Adorno writes:

To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation. (*Prisms* 34)

While the aftermath of the Holocaust demands the highest level of dialectical but nevertheless articulate vigilance from the cultural critic, it imposes upon poets—in Adorno’s analysis—the responsibility to be silent.⁹ Whatever might be the apparent extremity of Adorno’s position—and the insult it directs towards a poet like Celan who

⁹ Adorno’s remark turns Walter Benjamin’s generalization about the inextricability of civilization from barbarity into a fact about the post-World-War-II condition. While no doubt a valid move, this allows him to turn the Holocaust into the defining moment of European consciousness at the expense of numerous atrocities committed by the West on non-Western soil. Adorno (unlike Heidegger, who has to think from a specific and concrete guilt rather than an abstract version of complicity) has, therefore, very little to say about the atomic bombing of Japan, and does not refrain from racist and shamelessly pro-European and pro-West sentiments; a shocking example can be found in *Minima Moralia* (section 32 titled “Savages are not more noble”; pp. 52-53). His controversial remarks on jazz have been read as racist, but also see Robinson’s “The Jazz Essays of Theodor Adorno,” which is an impressive historicization of Adorno’s position. Adorno’s opinions on jazz, Robinson argues, derive from his experience of jazz as interpreted by Weimar musicians. Robinson does not explain why Adorno would want to cling to his misconceptions

sought to survive the aftermath of the Holocaust not through silence but through poetic speech—his misgivings about poetry arise from a legitimate concern over the extreme duress under which the arts are placed in an increasingly commercialized society, and the possible dangers of retaining the aesthetic autonomy that bourgeois societies have offered to the arts. For Adorno, art's separation from society and its horrors is precisely what makes art complicit in that society. In the posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), he says:

[B]y its starting point, by its distance from any praxis, art in the face of mortal threat becomes ideology through the harmlessness of its mere form, regardless of its content. [...] Art can only be reconciled with its existence by exposing its own semblance, its internal emptiness. Its most binding criterion today is that in terms of its own complexion, unreconciled with all realistic deception, it no longer tolerates anything harmless. In all art that is still possible, social critique must be raised to the level of form, to the point that it wipes out all manifestly social content. (250)

Adorno's support for a combination of extreme formal experimentation and an anti-realism that rejects "social content" as "deception" thus arises from the need to guard against a ubiquitous ideology that thrives in the semblance of harmlessness. Guilt is a default position, imposed by history (and perhaps by Christian mythology):

Every artwork today, the radical ones included, has its conservative aspect; its existence helps to secure the spheres of spirit and culture, whose real powerlessness and complicity with the principle of disaster becomes plainly evident. [...] Artworks are, a-priori, socially culpable, and each one that deserves this name seeks to expiate this guilt. (*Aesthetic Theory* 234)

Here the artwork is closely modeled upon the post-Holocaust Western human subject for whom there is no escape from shared responsibility for history. Its guilt derives not merely from the simple fact that the creation of the artwork is an instance of what Arendt calls "the faculty of action" and therefore is a performance in a public space, but also and

even after he had encountered more authentic forms of jazz in America, except for a passing reference to

principally from its affirmative character—to use Marcuse’s term—that makes it complicit with the society that it bolsters and from which it draws security and prestige.¹⁰

But for Adorno, art does not merely affirm contemporary cultural formations; it can also make reparations for its complicity. Recommended modes of petitioning for redemption include rejection of mimesis and of the communicative remit of art, and the pursuit of an aesthetic of radical difficulty. The most interesting theoretical linkages

his preference for written as opposed to improvised music (16).

¹⁰ When Adorno addresses Celan’s poetry in *Aesthetic Theory*, he is certainly less enthusiastic than when he speaks about Beckett’s plays, which are for him exemplary in their resistance to ideology and social co-option. But neither is he dismissive: he finds that “hermetic poetry” does perform, in its best specimens, the kind of asocial self-evacuation characteristic of Beckett’s plays. Adorno observes:

The beginnings [of hermetic poetry] were not free of the small-mindedness and desperate rapture of an art religion that convinced itself that the world was created for the sake of a beautiful verse or a well-turned phrase. In the work of the most important contemporary representative of German hermetic poetry, Paul Celan, the experiential content of the hermetic is inverted. His poetry is permeated by the shame of art in the face of suffering that escapes both experience and sublimation. Celan’s poems want to speak of the most extreme horror through silence. Their truth-content itself becomes negative. They imitate a language beneath the helpless language of human beings, indeed beneath all organic language: It [sic] is that of the dead speaking of stones and stars. The last rudiments of the organic are liquidated; what Benjamin noted in Baudelaire, that his poetry is without aura, comes into its own in Celan’s work. The infinite discretion with which his radicalism proceeds compounds his force. The language of the lifeless becomes the last possible comfort for a death that is deprived of all meaning. The passage into the inorganic is to be followed not only in thematic motifs; rather, the trajectory from horror to silence is to be reconstructed in the hermetic works. Distantly analogous to Kafka’s treatment of expressionist painting, Celan transposes into linguistic processes the increasing abstraction of landscape, progressively approximating it to the inorganic. (*Aesthetic Theory* 322)

Adorno’s insight about what might be called Celan’s posthumanism certainly accords with Celan’s own description of his aspiration to write a poetry that is accessible to both the monkey and the robot: his universe is both human and inhuman. This is explicit both in Celan’s “Meridian” speech as well as in his consistently self-reflexive poetry: in “Fadensonnen,” he says: “es sind / noch Lieder zu singen jenseits / der Menschen” (“there are / still songs to sing beyond / humankind”) (*Selected Poetry and Prose* 240, 241). Whether this language that looks beyond the human is ultimately escapist as “the last possible comfort for a death [...] deprived of all meaning” is debatable, however, and it is reasonable to expect that Celan’s efforts to reinvest language with revelatory charge and negative hope might have been more appealing to Adorno if Heidegger had not been particularly influential for Celan’s aesthetics.

Adorno’s unfortunate, though understandable, prejudice against Heidegger is the least useful aspect of the former’s work. The greatest testament to Celan’s intellectual honesty and genuine openness to otherness is his extended and serious engagement with Heidegger’s thinking, and his genuine struggle to respect the thought while questioning the integrity of the thinker. A recent study of Celan’s relationship with Heidegger suggests that the famous meeting between the two resulted in some sort of a reconciliation—see Lyon 164–66; all of chapter 14 is relevant. The outcome of the meeting, however, is not as important as the frequent discussions imply: what is more important is Celan’s readiness to engage Heidegger’s thought without prejudging it as incipiently fascist. Celan’s understanding of the simultaneity of right and wrong is ultimately more insightful than Adorno’s attempt to navigate similar terrain by means of the German philosophical tradition.

between an aesthetic of difficulty and an ethic of complicity can be found in the dialogue between Georg Lukács and Adorno¹¹ in the wake of Modernism. For both theorists, an awareness of inescapable complicity—usually with capitalism and bourgeois values—is desirable in the (usually bourgeois) artist. Their famous disagreement is rooted in their opposed attitudes towards difficulty and formal experimentalism in relation to complicity. Lukács considers immediate access to the artwork a sign of its social commitment and intellectual honesty: ‘difficult’ artworks were therefore disconnected from social reality and unwilling to disengage themselves from the social stratifications generated by capitalist economies. For Adorno, however, difficult art alone can truly resist capitalist ideology; only by being useless and inaccessible can they become true artifacts: “The acute reason today for the social inefficacy of artworks—those that do not surrender to crude propaganda—is that in order to resist the all-powerful system of communication they must rid themselves of any communicative means that would perhaps make them

¹¹ Johanna Drucker’s *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* offers a reading of Adorno’s theories apparently based on popular caricatures of his positions: his famed ‘negativity,’ his elitism, and his claim for autonomous art. Concluding her summary dismissal of Adorno, Drucker comments:

Fine art embodies *alternative forms of expression*—but not always *values* that are opposed to those of administered culture. The tricky character of this alternative is that its values often serve the interests of that culture even as they masquerade as critical or oppositional. The self-interest of the artist is supposedly absent, utterly suspended, from the work. The ideological subtext of the artist’s own situation goes unacknowledged. The idea of complicity suggests closing this gap. (64-65)

Excellent as these observations are, their claim to originality lies in proposing with a revolutionary flourish “the idea of complicity” as a way out of the impasse generated by what Drucker characterizes as the dehistoricized and ideological aesthetic autonomy proposed by Adorno and Peter Bürger (64). The fact is that the idea of complicity (*Mitschuld*) is a key term for Adorno’s post-World-War-II writings and implicit in the concept of immanent critique that has been central to the Frankfurt School in general. In fact, as I will show presently, Adorno uses difficulty as part of the perilous attempt to absolve art of its original sin of being part of the world. To consider a thinker like Adorno, regardless of the final validity of his positions, as unaware of history and ideology is a terrible folly. Drucker’s own passionless acceptance of complicity as a general condition that cannot be ignored but need not be resisted would fall precisely in the no-fly zone of ideologies of accommodation and skeptical pessimism of which Drucker accuses Adorno. There is no escape from complicity, perhaps, but that only makes resistance all the more urgent. This does not diminish Drucker’s understandable impatience with Adorno’s terror of popular art and the co-option of Adorno’s critique of the culture industry to valorize ‘high art,’ which can rarely extricate itself from art

accessible to the public” (*Aesthetic Theory* 243). Only as failed communication can art escape complicity.

The Frankfurt school was not alone in emphasizing an immanent critique of society in which thought was constantly aware of its own participation in currents of oppression and injustice, though Adorno’s work was particularly important in taking these questions to the realm of aesthetics. After the Jewish Holocaust, which could not have been perpetrated without the collusion of a huge majority of the German people, the question of collective responsibility for harms perpetrated by political entities has remained vital for Western intellectuals. The work of Karl Jaspers and Hannah Arendt, for instance, raises this question with passionate urgency. Jaspers’ term “metaphysical guilt”¹² can serve as a quasi-theological complement to Adorno’s historical-materialist rejection of localized innocence: the fact that we are human places upon us the responsibility for all acts performed by humans. Arendt offers a useful distinction between guilt and responsibility in which the term ‘responsibility’ is used to describe something akin to “metaphysical guilt” in its extra-judicial aspect. In essays such as “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility” and “Collective Responsibility,” Arendt suggests that guilt involves active and knowing participation in the violent or illegal act—the concept therefore is primarily legal and applies to individuals. Responsibility involves

based on models of consumption rather than critique. But her confidence in the bad faith of artists seems excessive.

¹² In *The Question of German Guilt*, Jaspers divides guilt into four categories: criminal, political, moral, and metaphysical. Of the last, he says:

There exists a solidarity among men as human beings that makes each co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world, especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge. If I fail to do whatever I can to prevent them, I too am guilty. If I was present at the murder of others without risking my life to prevent it, I feel guilty in a way not adequately conceivable either legally, politically or morally. That I live after such a thing has happened weighs upon me as indelible guilt. (Jaspers 26)

contributing to an injustice or illegality without direct knowledge of having done so, and without participating directly in the wrong act (“Organized Guilt” 149-50). Collective responsibility arises under two conditions: the person is responsible for something she has not done personally or individually, and the reason for responsibility is membership in a group that she cannot voluntarily dissolve (“Collective Responsibility” 149). Only individuals can be guilty, but communities and nations and humanity itself are collectively responsible for human history:

[N]o moral, individual and personal, standards of conduct will ever be able to excuse us from collective responsibility. This vicarious responsibility for things we have not done, this taking upon ourselves the consequences for things we are entirely innocent of, is the price we pay for the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves but among our fellow men, and that the faculty of action, which, after all, is the political faculty par excellence, can be actualized only in one of the many and manifold forms of human community. (“Collective Responsibility” 196-97)

Despite this conviction, it is important for Arendt that the distinction between guilt and responsibility be maintained. The attribution of guilt—of direct and personal responsibility—is also the attribution of free will and individuality to a person, and makes moral action possible from within a permanent and insuperable condition of collective responsibility.¹³ The distinction between guilt and responsibility is, however, not as rigid as Arendt might like to believe: if the generalized acknowledgement of historical sin in Judeo-Christian piety suggests responsibility rather than guilt, the acceptance of personal punishment for collective responsibility in Christ’s passion suggests that responsibility at any moment can be interpreted, experienced, and redeemed as guilt.

The problem is that in such a scenario, the onlooker is never judged guilty in any way by a court, for example. Nevertheless, guilt ensues.

¹³ From the other side of the guilt-divide, Heidegger has similar things to say about guilt in section 58 of *Being and Time*. For instance: “*Being-guilty does not first result from an indebtedness* [Heidegger connects through etymological analysis the concept of ‘guilt’ to that of ‘owing’] *but that, on the contrary, indebtedness is possible only ‘on the basis’ of a primordial Being-guilty*” (*Being and Time* 329; italics as in the original; parenthesis added).

Much of lyric poetry's power to dramatize as well as interrogate complicity derives from the strategies typical of difficult poetry. Pronouns are an important case in point. Instead of reading the ubiquitous decentred 'I' of twentieth-century poetry as arising from a pre-articulated theory of subjectivity which is then redirected into lyric practice, we might think of the foregrounding of such a self as immanent to the evolving logic of lyric form. When the first person singular—which has historically been a linguistic convention rather than a vehicle of authorial sincerity (barring, perhaps, the brief failed experiment in early Romanticism and some versions of Confessional poetry)—is seen as a mask¹⁴ that hides other subject positions, both singular and plural, then individual speech acts of an 'I' or a 'We' become loci of performativity that can be plotted back, depending on textual cues (if any), to one or more of other pronominal or nominal possibilities. This disposition of pronouns projects into the social space the impossibility of a pure individuality, which alone can localize and thereby restrict both innocence and guilt. Complicity in collective as well as individual acts is inevitable for the lyric subject when pronouns become interchangeable or uncertain. The version of complicity that emerges from this inability of the lyric subject to produce a semblance of stable selfhood is different from collective responsibility as Arendt describes it. Responsibility works on a dualistic principle by which the privately innocent individual accepts blame for collective actions because acts are always public and therefore in principle always shared. What might be inferred from the deictic and syntactical

¹⁴ In this sense, all of lyric poetry might in fact be described in terms of the 'mask lyric' as Adena Rosmarin describes the genre. The most thoughtful discussion of the conventionality of lyric subjectivity can be found in Denise Riley's *The Words of Selves*, where the complexity of the situation is given its full due. A significant and characteristically paradoxical passage reads: "[Y]ou can also have an impersonal lyric 'I', not at all confessional or self-aggrandising. [...] The less that the poetic work is taken to be only consciously generated by its author, and the more archaic and dubious aspirations to technical control begin to sound, then, paradoxically, the more important the actual figure of the poet may become" (*The Words of Selves* 94).

strategies of lyric poetry, on the other hand, is an image of a subject that is constitutionally inauthentic and liable to expand, contract, engulf or be engulfed by other subject positions, and/or negate itself: the dualism here is dynamic and potentially inclusive of monism.¹⁵ Poetry's tendency to promote the vertical expansion of language along the paradigmatic axis also accentuates complex connectivities that exceed the simple causal and serial linkages implied by the rules of syntax. The 'spatializing' impulse of much of difficult poetry, along with philological and paragrammic explorations (the latter being particularly popular with poets of an avant-garde persuasion) create possibilities of sense-making unrelated to the sequential unfolding of meaning through 'normal' syntax. Again, if read as a microcosm of social being, it implies illogical but powerful relationships between individuals and totalities that fall outside the controlled environment of simple cause and effect.

Vagueness of pronominal reference, intertextuality, and multiple reference are some of the classic Postmodern devices that generate ontologies of dispersal and interdependence, and non-linear and non-syllogistic modalities of causation. Read as allegories of communal being, they offer an ethos of interdependence and, in the context of harm, complicity. J.H. Prynne is probably the one contemporary poet who takes these poetic devices—already put to good use by the Modernists—to their extreme states of tension so that each word becomes a late-Modernist vortex through which significance spirals into multiple semantic contexts and allusive densities. Such poetic practices

¹⁵ Contemporary British poetry, like all twentieth-century poetry, has been preoccupied with the issue of pronouns and their foregrounding of number rather than name. For an excellent discussion of the subject, see Ken Edwards, "Grasping the Plural" in *Poets on Writing*. Also see Drew Milne's "Agoraphobia, and the Embarrassment of Manifestos" for a roughly contemporaneous discussion of the third person plural and artistic collectives with frequent references to Prynne, particularly the poem "Questions for the Time Being," a meditation on pronouns and politics.

acquire particularly strong moral urgency when the medium of poetry itself is imagined not just as a system of reference, but as also carrying moral traces of the history of its use. Peter Riley, Prynne's fellow Cambridge poet, however, has been increasingly critical of the generalizations about the moral correctness of difficulty and of the excessive emphasis on complicity that has dominated much of Cambridge poetry, particularly the output of its male practitioners. In what follows, I juxtapose the work of these two poets to explore the possibilities and limits of a poetics of complicity.

Prynne, Riley, and Complicity

Prynne's conceptualization of poetic difficulty not only includes the distrust of language that resonates in Celan's poetry—which is a major influence¹⁶—but also the

¹⁶ Prynne has of course been greatly influenced by Celan's poetry, as indicated by his early essay "‘Modernism’ in German Poetry," in which he speaks with considerable passion about Celan, and declares him closer to American Modernism rather than British poetry, indicating that Prynne considered British poetry to be estranged from both its European heritage and its ties with American Modernism. Speaking of Celan's later poetry, Prynne says: "These poems might suggest a dispassionate Robert Creeley, or even Marianne Moore, if the latter had ever abandoned her whimsical menagerie and confronted her predicament without that private hoard of oddments; but they are not the kind of poem that by any stretch of the imagination could have been written in England" (337). Birgitta Johansson's *The Engineering of Being: An Ontological Approach to J.H. Prynne* explores in detail the influence of the German poetic and philosophical tradition on Prynne's poetry (53-60); she discusses the relationship between Celan and Prynne in terms of their shared interest in Heidegger. Prynne's recent essay "Huts" has affirmed his continuing interest in the relationship between Celan and Heidegger ("Huts" 624-27). The overlap between the work of Prynne and Celan is most frequently discussed in the context of Prynne's elegy for Paul Celan, "Es Lebe der König" from *Brass*. In his essay "Nothing but Mortality: Prynne and Celan," Geoffrey Ward refers to the connections between Celan's "Meridian" speech and Prynne's poem (150). An important reading of the relationship between Prynne and Celan is also available in Anthony Mellors' *Late Modernist Poetics from Pound to Prynne*. While Ward does not investigate specific allusions to Celan's poetry (as opposed to the biographical detail of Celan's suicide or his Holocaust survivor status) in Prynne's poem, Mellors does take up this task. He notices, for instance, the references to "Todesfuge" in the poem. (It is possible to extend this line of enquiry indefinitely; most of the key words in "Es Lebe der König" can be shown to allude to Celan's works. I hope, however, to discuss this theme elsewhere in detail, since it will deflect attention from the present argument.) It is Ward's final remarks that are particularly pertinent for my own thoughts about Celan's importance for Prynne:

In the era of postmodernism, disruption of the textual surface and a compound fracture of the meaning and the subject all gain positive and even playful connotations. However, texts by Prynne and Celan can be implicated in the general poststructuralist fallout only through culpable

moral safeguards prescribed by Adorno to ensure that a post-Holocaust art does not succumb to the barbarity of the society that hosts it. In “A Letter to Andrew Duncan,” Prynne describes the relationship between the lyric poet and history in terms very similar to Adorno’s description of art’s a-priori culpability: “The poet now stands against his own history because that must seek to enrol him in a collusive establishment, the class which pre-empt[s] the means of interpretation and the right to comment” (101). Poetry stands opposed to its own history and the structures of power that historically legitimized it; yet the opposition itself has to be ironized if poetry is not to withdraw into a fantasy of pure utterance—ideology is pervasive, and its deployment highly decentered and potentially riveted to each private gesture and thought. In Prynne’s view, to reclaim for lyric poetry the force of public relevance through narrative coherence and social critique is risky because here poetry comes into sharp conflict with its own history as a “rhetorized instrument,” used and supported by those in power to enforce and perpetuate the mythic and the unreal. Prynne’s mistrust is pervasive enough to include poetry and its motives: he is, in this sense, *the* poet of complicity.¹⁷ A willingness to disbelieve poetry’s claim to a state of exception is what distinguishes the aesthetic of complicity from what might be called ‘political’ poetry. Even the scathing satirical work of someone like Ed Dorn falls into the latter category: the content of his work fully accepts a position of complicity, but

inattention to the irony, interiority and dark stoicism which marks [sic] the shared ground of their poetry. (Ward 150)

The most subtle analysis of “Es Lebe der König” can be found in D.S. Marriott’s “Contemporary Poetry and Resistance” 166-68; the material is drawn mostly from his PhD dissertation “An Introduction to the Poetry of J.H. Prynne.” The most recent study of the poem is Matt Ffytche’s 2006 essay, which again explores the intertextual elements in the poem.

¹⁷ Simon Perril’s observations in this respect are therefore extremely pertinent:

Few writers have explored the rhetoric of lyric with such ferocity; its self-appointed desire to “speak for” or “on behalf of”, and its complicity in the very machinations of power and exploitation that it would speak out against. The sense of wounded utterance that runs through Prynne’s work is never allowed to convincingly occupy a pure register of moral outrage. Instead,

his relatively conventional approach to linguistic form in his later poetry tends to absorb him into the rhetorical tradition of poetry that comes, as Prynne insists, preloaded with power and entitlements.¹⁸ This is why Prynne's position, which parallels the famed 'negativity' of the Frankfurt School, has been attractive for a number of younger Cambridge-affiliated poets and critics.

In the 2004 poem "Refuse Collection," we find Prynne's language of complicity at its most attenuated. The occasion for the poem is the news and highly disturbing images of the torture that had happened in the Abu Ghraib prison.¹⁹ It is a poem that is essentially decapitated by its vacant subject positions and populated instead with ironical imperatives that enjoin the performance of blatantly unethical acts. In the three dozen years that divide "Refuse Collection" from "The Numbers," Prynne has evidently had the opportunity to reconsider his confidence in the individual as a site from which collective change might commence: *Brass* and "Es Lebe der König" constitute an important stage in this development. If the individual is what the collective has elected, then the problem of Western democracy's simulacrum of political agency becomes paramount. The contractarian model of society creates a form of consent that overwhelms and silences dissent in the absence of numerical majority. Election is thus also reduction, and implies

the focus is self-consciously upon the rhetorical mileage that such a register seeks to exploit.
(Perril)

¹⁸ This is the explanatory advantage that Prynne's linking of rhetoric and complicity has over, say, a more simplistic account such as that offered by Derrida in defense of Heidegger, and reused in Sanders' work on complicity, where the overzealous application of the 'always-already' formula elicits conviction only from the already converted.

¹⁹ I refrain from discussing the correspondences between the actions suggested in the poem and the actual events in Abu Ghraib because the general facts are easily available to those interested. Excellent and exhaustive accounts of the Abu Ghraib prison torture have appeared since the event. *Basic Documents about the Treatment of the Detainees at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib* edited by Frederick Zimmerman; Lila Rajiva's *The Language of Empire: Abu Ghraib and the American Media*; and *The Torture Papers: The Road to Abu Ghraib* edited by Karen J. Greenberg and Joshua L. Dratel are important documents that were produced in the United States after the news agencies decided to break the story. Books continue to be published on the issue, though the memory of the event has been all but obliterated from the American consciousness.

handing over public agency and will to another in return for the right to exist as a private individual. While the affirmation of our own collective existence—in the socialist sense—might be a way of resisting the divisive forces that capitalism deploys in order to deactivate critical thinking in relation to mindless consumption, we also find that this willing acceptance of our social being in no way guarantees moral righteousness. On the contrary, our morality—tied as it is to mores—is in constant danger of being standardized and monetized into custom: Prynne in fact realizes this in “The Numbers” when he says: “I am no / more, than custom” (10). The possibility of singular as well as collective utterance is preserved in that poem, however, since it balances the fact of being spoken for by society and language, and the hope of speaking a new society into being. But Prynne’s later poetry progressively refines a strategy of combining the problem of guilt and social agency with the formal device of pronominal ambiguity: while this device is pervasive in contemporary poetry, the vocabulary of politics and economics that accompanies it gives a particular moral potency to the abdication of any clear subject position, even if it is only one of abjection.

“Refuse Collection” explicitly—and very rarely for Prynne—addresses history as a particular event. Its appearance marks the ending of Prynne’s reluctance to identify his poetry with immediate political contexts, even though it was always understood that his poetry was political in its persistent critique of poetic complacencies from the perspective of a flawed history. But with “Refuse Collection,” he comes as close as he has ever been to protest poetry. It is in protest poetry that the political relevance of difficulty and intransigence experiences the greatest degree of stress: if the poet is to express outrage, and function as the expression of the conscience of a (language-) community, then

directness of address ought to carry the greatest conviction. Difficulty would then seem perverse and self-destructive, even sadistic, in its gleeful continuation of a destruction that has its insufferable counterpart in the ‘real world.’ There is a palpable conflict between the urge to gnomic utterance that Prynne has increasingly favored in his poetic career and the need to find a linguistic response for an event that had used silence and silencing as an ally. Adorno’s strategy of emptying out all content would be signally ineffectual as well, since the poem deliberately presents itself as occasioned by a particular historical event.

The title of the poem—“Refuse Collection”—dramatizes to a certain extent the superfluity of the poetic act by aligning it with the terminal act in the chain of consumption: the institutionalized process of collecting refuse, which can also be privatized through the process of picking through trash. ‘Refuse collection’ is both a demand and a description, with the word ‘refuse’ hovering between its verbal and nominal senses.²⁰ If one takes ‘refuse’ as a noun, the phrase can then point back to a number of early Prynne poems that advance the possibility that garbage might be the site of a productive and affirmative refusal. Yet the heroic and ultimately Romantic act of collecting refuse, that embrace of the marginal and irrelevant, is undercut by the imperative to abjure collection and collectivity altogether. And a further ambiguity lurks in the re-fusion within refusal, so that a unity might then be the desideratum. The morally suspect strings of imperatives that populate the poem make it impossible to read the title with a total lack of irony: the poem is indeed far away from the early and not

²⁰ A preliminary reading of the poem can be found in Mazen Himyari, “As They Tie Whelps to the Bellwether: A Note on ‘Refuse Collection.’” Ian Davidson’s essay “Democratic Consensus in Prynne’s Refuse Collection” is the most extended scholarly discussion of the poem. My discussion of pronouns in “Refuse Collection” intersects to an extent with similar discussions in both essays.

unconfident speculations on hope and love within which ‘refuse’ appeared in some of his earliest poetry.²¹

The first stanza is typical of the staccato effects of a large proportion of Prynne’s late poetry. The accumulation of monosyllabic words casts doubt upon the efficacy of ligature, both verbal and social:

To a light led sole in pit of, this by slap-up
barter of an arm rest cap, on stirrup trade in
crawled to many bodies, uncounted. Talon up
crude oil-for-food, incarnadine incarcerate, get
foremost a track rocket, rapacious in heavy
investment insert tool this way up. This way
can it will you they took to fast immediate satis-
faction or slather, new slave run the chain store
enlisted, posture writhing what they just want
we’ll box tick that, nim nim. Camshot spoilers
strap to high stakes head to the ground elated

²¹ “A Gold Ring Called Reluctance” from the 1968 *Kitchen Poems* speaks affectionately of refuse:

I am interested instead in
discretion: what I love and also the spread
of indifferent qualities. Dust, objects of use
broken by wear, by simply slowing too much
to be retrieved as agents. Scrap; the old ones,
the dead who sit daily at the feast. Each
time I hesitate I think of them, loving what
I know. (*Poems* 23)

Antiquity is imagined as lovable dust and scrap that has escaped socially and economically determined structures of utility. This sentiment will be repeated in “L’Extase de M. Poher” from *Brass*: “Rubbish is / pertinent; essential; the / most intricate presence in our entire culture; the / ultimate sexual point of the whole place turned / into a model question” (*Poems* 161). For a useful reading of this poem and a discussion of the implications of this valorization of rubbish, see Reeve and Kerridge 6-10; also see Ben Watson’s “Garbage.” The most extended analysis of the poem can be found in Keston Sutherland’s “J.H. Prynne and Philology”; see pp. 230-246 for discussions of the term “rubbish.” In his “Letter to Steve McCaffery,” Prynne declares: “I for my own part have a positive addiction to the meanest trash and to unmitigated urban pollution” (46). The move from ‘love’ to ‘addiction’ emphasizes compulsive behavior rather than free choice: this devaluation of the value of the devalued echoes in the ambiguity of the phrase “refuse collection.” In “Refuse Collection,” the issue is not to love the past through rubbish, even though the conclusion refers to ‘the holy city’ that he talked of so eloquently in a poem of that name in *The White Stones* thirty-five years ago, where again the act of walking on the ground invokes the mystery of the presence of the past under the feet as debris. The sanctity that the act of walking over the grass acquires in the awareness of our own being as both singular and collective in “The Holy City” wavers in the final stanza of “Refuse Collection” as the walk becomes a ‘longterm’ ‘march’ powered by ownership. On a somewhat more pessimistic note, Adorno puts garbage in its place: “Alle Kultur nach Auschwitz, samt der dringlichen Kritik daran, ist Müll” (“All culture after Auschwitz, along with its urgent critique, is garbage”; *Negative Dialektik* 357). Adorno’s intrepid but typical overgeneralization makes one wonder about the source of the imperial authority that sanctions such dismissals.

detonator like a bear dancing stripped canny
sex romp, webbing taint. Confess sell out the
self input, yes rape yes village gunship by
apache rotor capital genital grant a seed trial
take a nap a twin.²²

Even before sex appears as an explicit theme, the movement is fundamentally sexual, up and down, with an emphasis on penetration: for instance, “talon up,” and “this way up” as opposed to “in pit of” and “insert.” The prepositions that open and close the first phrase—“To a light led sole in pit of”—introduce a central concern of the poem that is part of, but not limited to the sexual paradigm: possession as condition and act. What could in speech pass off as an infinitive, “to alight,” is broken up to ensure that the dative mode of “to” and its resonances of both giving and of designating objecthood become visible. Both the subject and the object of the prepositions are absent so that the phrase is decapitated at either end: doing and owning are indicated, but the givers and recipients are absent, implying that the inability of the lines to achieve completion is at least partly due to its difficulty in locating responsibility for ‘taking’ in both the active and passive sense of the word. Iraqis are not, after all, merely victims: the allusion to “slave run chain store” implies the poem’s awareness of the long history of Arab slave trade as well as contemporary sweatshops and of course the bound male figures from Abu Ghraib. Any simple dualism of torturer and victim is reductive and ahistorical, but at the same time excruciatingly real in its specific enactments.

The photographic evidence of torture in Abu Ghraib prison itself occupies a highly ambiguous moral position: the evidence itself was, after all, part of the torture, since the prisoners’ final humiliation is to know that their dehumanization has been photographically recorded to be distributed as souvenirs. The viewer of the images has to

be aware of the nature of the photos as deliberate compositions—human pyramids, for instance, with a youthful sightseer posing for a postcard to send home. This camera is not in any sense candid; its subjects are aware of its presence and those who operate it are convinced of the legitimacy and impunity of their acts. The reversal of roles that made the torture possible—the soldiers representing the innocent victims of terrorism, and the prisoners representing actual, potential or possible terrorists—retains its force in the photographs, and any outrage must reckon with the viewer’s inevitable role as fellow traveller in the gasoline-streaked highways of illicit desire. Guilt pays for the upkeep of sociality and praxis.

The urge to take, to collect—represented by the repetition of ‘nim,’ the Teutonic verb that means ‘take’—is one of the focal themes of the poem. The act of taking appears in various guises in the stanza: “get,” “took,” “rape,” “take,” and “nim.” The proximity of the word “rape” also gives “village” a flavor of “pillage.” The Shakespearean sense of the word “incarnadine” invokes the guilt-ridden ravings of Lady Macbeth, reinforcing the occasion of the poem and at the same time expanding its temporal horizon. The word ‘slap-up,’ adjectivized by the hyphen, can invoke both convivial excess and physical violence: this is another instance of the way in which the text distracts the reader, eager for moral outrage, into a linguistic maze. Despite its effect of scatter through time and paradigmatic space, however, the first and last words of the stanza interlock through a pun: ‘to’ is also ‘two,’ which is a ‘twin.’ The reader’s momentary incarceration in the circular labyrinth of the stanza provides an intimation of her own half-human monstrousness.

²² The text is unpaginated.

Yet the poem is not without its moment of transcendent hope. If poetic creativity itself cannot offer a solution to our collective quandaries, its exercise of exemplary vigilance can in fact express both the deepest despair and the possibility of an escape route, however negative, that does not resort to feel-good platitudes. Despite all their irony, the imperatives that populate “Refuse Collection” imply the possibility of reclaiming agency for the individual through a paradoxical affirmation of collective guilt:

Talon up
 crude oil-for-food, incarnadine incarcerate, *get*
 foremost a track rocket, rapacious in heavy
 investment *insert* tool this way up. [...]
Confess sell out the
 self input, yes *rape* yes village gunship by
 apache rotor capital genital *grant* a seed trial
take a nap a twin. (Italics added)

The torture is being ordered in the poem after the fact, and the possibility of agency is purchased at the cost of admitting to complicity in the act. The sense of complicity presents itself most tangibly here as a confusion of pronouns: in a sense, this is the ethical value that pronominal uncertainty has acquired in Prynne’s corpus. The juxtaposition of ‘you’ and ‘they’ creates an ambiguity that the poem’s syntactical irregularities leave unresolved: “This way / can it will *you they* took to fast immediate satis- / faction or slather.” We could divide the string “will you they took” into ‘will you’ and ‘they took’ and therefore read it as a request abutting a description, and yet ‘you’ and ‘they’ seep into each other’s spaces, with ‘they’ reinforcing the plural possibility of ‘you,’ and ‘you’ pulling the third-person exteriority of ‘they’ closer to direct address and accountability. The act of taking, which appears in the first stanza through the word ‘nim,’ is marked out as devoid of a clear—and therefore punishable—agent.

The second stanza intensifies this pronominal guilt:

Fruiting bodies vintage
 shagged out on batch stand-by, grander conceptual
 gravid with foetor, sweet rot adoring placid
 or regular. It is we they do it, even yet now
 sodomised in a honey cell, pitted up against
 the good cheat dimpled in a power cuff jersey,
 shrug to fit waist for traffic, kick the door in.
 Go on, do it, we'll photograph everything, home
 movies hold steady on while they is we do it,
 by eye it takes oozing huge debt. Reschedule
 value credits, war for oil, oil for food, food for
 sex molest modest reject stamp on limp abjected
 lustral panoply. Little crosses everywhere, yours
 and mine makeshift parlour chicken rape private
 sold down DIY there is a country.

In the opening lines of the stanza, a semi-pastoral image of the sweet rotting of grape juice into wine synchronizes perfectly with the more sinister suggestions of decay: the poem rests here in the exteriority of descriptions of natural processes. But the second sentence shifts to the problem of complicity: “It is we they do it, even yet now / sodomised in a honey cell.” The earlier pronominal pair “you they” is now “we they”; the incriminating vectors now point unambiguously and equally in both directions—towards the self as much as towards the other. Uncertain pronominal clusters reappear further on in the stanza: “hold steady on while they is we do it,” and here too, the string “they is we do it,” blatantly ungrammatical in its violation of the grammatical rules of number, problematizes both agency and language. If Rimbaud’s famous statement—“JE est un autre”—marks the advent of an extreme self-consciousness mediated by a displaced self, Prynne’s version of this alienation from the self reverses the direction of displacement (Rimbaud 200). Loss of identity is as much the invasion of ‘they’ into ‘we’ as the dislocation of the singular self into its other. Thus when pronominal ambiguity passes through the collective and re-enters the individual lyric voice, the singular cannot

anymore claim separateness from the collective: pronominal shifts therefore carry historical residues that press beyond existential angst into the realm of the ethical. The condition of being embedded in social and historical matrices is presented here as the problem of complicity in acts of collective violence: if modern poetry's insights about the instability of self and of pronominal deixis are to have implications for praxis, they will have to address their own histories of complicity.

The syntactic insufficiency of the poem appears as the direct expression of the difficulties of guilt, as the lines below indicate:

It is to be believed by
living daylights voided moral defection by blank
horror for terror of sacrifice, stairway to air
drilled by fierce devotion, say yes. Brutal finish
this sentence, go on do it.

Even 'finishing' a sentence seems an act of brutality here (though the sense of 'sentence' as 'prison term' is eminently active as well), an act that one has to be dared and goaded into performing, and an act that the poem rarely performs: language strains against its own impossibility. The imperative here—"finish / this sentence"—seems to be directed to the poem itself, daring it to produce closure and completeness in the face of its own moral bankruptcy and loss of agency: the passive structures ("It is to be believed") and absent agents continue to indicate the disappearance of the subject. Even contrite acceptance of guilt is viewed with suspicion by the exacting moral voice of the poem. In stanza 6, for instance, we find this vignette: "sup on this horror story full house durably / feel-good recoil: the aghast demeanour our shield." The "horror story" of Abu Ghraib is made endurable by our "feel-good recoil": the recoil is as much part of aggression as shooting a gun; the shield of moral outrage is part of the necessary armory of war. The

poem, then, can only open itself out to the bleakness of its own circumstances—the disavowal of semantic and syntactic closure performs a necessary and ritual laying down of arms while abjuring any claim to innocence.

We might briefly compare the staging of complicity in “Refuse Collection” with the following lines from Denise Levertov’s “During the Eichmann Trial”:

Pity this man [...]
whose obedience continued –
he, you, I, which shall I say?
He stands
isolate in a bulletproof
witness-stand of glass,
a cage, where we may view
ourselves, an apparition
telling us something he
does not know: we are members
one of another. (Levertov 29)

Thematically, this is close to what “Refuse Collection” can be construed to indicate, particularly in its equivocation over the pronoun as prelude to the final affirmation of the participatory nature of individual being—“he, you, I, which shall I say?” Yet the equivocation is only rhetorical and local; the poem returns to the divisions that it contests: a recantation caused as much by the pressure of a syntax that compels the choice of a definite pronoun as the eagerness to emphasize a moral in a traditional sense. Thus we find that it is an ‘I’ that ‘says’; it is a ‘he’ who stands and “does not know”; and it is a “we” whose reflection on the “isolate” Eichmann’s glass cage initiates “us” (and not Eichmann) into the secret of collective being. If Levertov and her readers are indeed to identify with a mass murderer who is reported to have congratulated himself on sending five million people to their graves, the verse’s unruffled movement through what must be an unbearable moment of self-reflection is disturbing in its banality. The instruction to

pity, which strikingly contrasts with Prynne's decapitated poem's savage demands to "rape" and torture, indicates that "During the Eichmann Trial" carefully retains the distinctness of subject positions. Finally the grammatical subject is privileged, and is unchallenged by the self-interrogation it performs. It is precisely this protected selfhood that Prynne's difficulty abjures when it foregoes the safe houses of syntax, and the poem thereby performs its recognition of complicity in ways that prohibit a retreat from that awareness.

The complicity of language itself and not just individual speech acts in the performance of violence has, as I have already suggested, been an important aspect of the Postmodern linguistic turn.²³ This view of language is certainly applicable to Prynne, who tends to speak vehemently against any attempt to imagine purity for language. His essay "A Quick Reposte to Handke's Dictum on Language" (2001), for instance, hits out against the suggestion that language could be a victim of war. Peter Handke observes in *Unter Tränen Fragend* (2000) that the first casualty of war is not truth, but language: "Das erste Opfer [des Krieges] ist nicht die Wahrheit, sondern die Sprache" (Handke 23). Prynne's response to this remark is, as he admits, rather quick, since he has not read the essay in which it appears, having come across it in Keston Sutherland's essay "Nervous

²³ A somewhat moderate position, which imagines language as innocent in the abstract but culpable in performance can be found in Paul Ricoeur's essay "Violence and Language." While language as "tool" or "code" (and we could add "langue") is, according to Ricoeur, "innocent" since "it does not speak" but "is spoken" (91), language as

spoken word, not completed, closed, and finished inventories, bears the dialectic of meaning and of violence. It is necessary then to penetrate the dynamism of language in order to encounter the struggle for meaning in its dispute with the expression of violence. Someone must express himself—not necessarily I, Mr. So-and-So, but my people, my class, my group, etc.—in order for violence to express itself. The intention of saying something must traverse this expression in order for the aim of meaning to be able to oppose itself to the expression of violence. There is thus in speech—but not in a language—a narrow space in which expression and the desire for meaning join and confront each other. This is where the spoken word is submitted to the most extreme tension between violence and rational meaning. Language as speech is such that it is the

Breakdowns in Chris Emery's *The Cutting Room*" (Sutherland 14). Yet Prynne feels compelled to respond to what he perceives as the naivety of Handke's observation: "Whatever the context may have been for the comment attributed to Peter Handke, who in a recent protest against the NATO air-raids over Bosnia is reported to have observed that the first victim of war is language, it is hard not to wince at what seems extreme naivety and self-righteousness" (23).²⁴ The certainty of this opening statement paradoxically remains under the sign of declared ignorance. However, if we accept Robin Purves' reading of Prynne's 1999 *Triodes*, composed around the same time that Handke wrote *Unter Tränen Fragend*, the opening lines of that poem explicitly refer to NATO's intervention in the former Yugoslavia.²⁵ Hence Prynne's response can be seen as not as 'quick' as might appear at first glance; the issue certainly exercised his critical as well as creative faculties. The declaration of war, Prynne argues in his essay, tends to be preceded by creation—mainly through language—of an environment in which the majority of the country's population would be in favor of inflicting large-scale damage and suffering on a populace perceived as antagonistic to their national interests. Language and literature, more than any other art form, is complicit in creating notions of national identity and political boundaries, and of developing the attitudes of noble

place where violence reaches expression at the same time that the intention of rational meaning finds support in the quest for a referent that motivates our speaking. (91-92)

²⁴ Prynne has a history of taking exception to dehistoricized accounts of language. His refutation of Saussure in "Stars, Tigers and the Shape of Words" (1993), and his argument with Heidegger in "Huts" (2008) are important examples. Compare Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "The disenchantment of the world means the extirpation of animism. Xenophanes mocked the multiplicity of gods because they resembled their creators, men, in all their idiosyncrasies and faults, and the latest logic denounces the words of language, which bear the stamp of impressions, as counterfeit coin that would be better replaced by neutral counters" (2).

²⁵ Purves argues that the phrase "enlightened states" in the first line of the poem "refers to the rhetoric that sought to justify the intervention of NATO in the former Yugoslavia, and attaches specifically to the governments of the United States and the United Kingdom. It inaugurated a precedent for the use of force wherever they decide it is 'just', according to their own definition of justice, i.e. in their own criminal self-

sacrifice and unavoidable casualties necessary to allay the conscience of the aggressor (23-24): “The mounting up of a war programme, in advance of the hostilities and to justify their methods, is a concatenation of intensely linguistic processes, in which the whole identity and propensity of individual language-histories are worked into the deepest complicity” (23).²⁶

interest or where tactics can be adopted which ensure minimal risk to their own personnel (even if they guarantee war crimes on the ground)” (“J.H. Prynne’s *Triodes*” 50).

²⁶ The importance of language in the construction of politically useful modalities of identity finds an intriguing illustration in Stalin’s foray into linguistics; see his *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics*. Adam B. Ulam declares in his biography of Stalin that “[t]here was no ‘deeper’ reason impelling Stalin to burst out with his contribution on linguistics. It was sheer whim, to which was added a recent determination to leave behind him philosophical treatises and a great theory” (Ulam 715). Yet it is significant that towards the end of his life and power, Stalin felt impelled to theorize the relationship between language and politics. The main target of his invective was the Georgian linguist Nikolai Marr, who had attempted to formulate a Marxist theory of language by arguing that language is part of the superstructure, and therefore undergoes changes in accordance with changes in the economic base. (The Language Poet Steve McCaffery declares that he was influenced by this aspect of Marr’s work; see “Trans-Avant-Garde”.) This was only one, and the most Marxist, aspect of his thought; he was also responsible for other theories, particularly the Japhetic theory. Marr, who became the official linguist of the Communist regime in the 1920s, was widely influential, and was something of a dictator in his own right—other linguists who disagreed with him could not expect to advance in their profession. So it is as something of an opponent of brute authority that Stalin presents himself in his treatise on linguistics, and at least some readers accepted this work as anti-authoritarian, however paradoxical this might seem. The motivation behind Stalin’s decision to chastise Marr, who had, luckily for the latter, been dead for the past fifteen years, is not entirely clear. Ulam suggests that this might have been on account of the negligence on the part of Marr’s successors to flatter Stalin adequately (716). Jean-Jacques Lecercle, on the other hand, suggests that Stalin understood Marr’s theories as questioning implicitly the proletarian revolution as an accomplished fact, so that Stalin’s counter-theory is “an instrument for defending a politics” (*A Marxist Theory of Language* 78). Lecercle argues that the change in the Russian language in response to the Revolution was only gradual, which would mean that if Marr is right, then the Revolution was not yet complete. Hence Stalin has to intervene and argue that in fact language is static and is in no way affected by, or is an index of, political change. However, Lecercle does not explain why Stalin postpones this defense until 1950, while remaining silent on the Korean War that had recently commenced. Piers Gray’s essay “Totalitarian Logic: Stalin on Linguistics,” published in *Stalin on Linguistics and Other Essays*, gives a far more persuasive and historically nuanced explanation of Stalin’s sudden interest in language in 1950. In Gray’s account, Stalin’s advocacy of a fundamentally unchanging language that defines a nation through historical periods, while seemingly anti-Marxist in spirit, is an attempt to establish the integrity of the Soviet Union and the status of Russian as the official language in spite of the multitudes of languages spoken in the region. Gray also points out that this explains the popularity of Stalin’s book in China—a Chinese translation appeared within a month—since China too was trying to define itself as a legitimate nation through an argument for a single language, in spite of the ethnic and linguistic variety of the geographical region. Gray does, however, suggest that the Chinese interpretation of the book was somewhat different from what Stalin might have intended: “[W]hile Wang Li saw Stalin brilliantly reworking Marxist orthodoxy to serve his own Chinese ends—namely, articulation of principles upon which a uniform speech could be imposed—it appears that Stalin had the opposite end in view: namely, the legitimation of as many regionalects as possible in order to preserve the dominance of one central language—Russian” (183).

As the global economy pushes the entire population of the earth into relationships of exchange, the economy of language remains limited, in Prynne's description, to national boundaries and specific language-histories. Unlike Humboldt or Heidegger, who used such an argument to bolster national identity and pride, Prynne uses it to speculate on collective guilt: "The complicity with bad consciousness is universal, though it may be argued that societies with more power to elaborate fanciful domains of individual freedom and purity of heart ought maybe to carry more of the guilt for their own self-deception" (25). While this suggestion is tentative—the double 'maybe's should be warning enough of half-baked thinking—this is certainly the direction in which Prynne's argument tends. Political power—which includes power over language and truth—places upon those who wield it the guilt of "fancifulness": Coleridge's distinction between fancy and imagination is powerfully evoked here, with the traditional disadvantage of fancy carefully kept intact. The concluding paragraph of "A Quick Riposte" casts doubt upon poetic exceptionalism:

Human language is the tribal continuity of expressive human behaviour, and is marked in its very core by whatever depravity or nobility an exercise of linguistic analysis may discover within the human record. If writers and poets think that language can somehow resist this involvement with the worst, while claiming natural affinity with the best, then they are guilty of a naive idealism that ought least of all to attract those who know how language works and what it can do. Treaties and diplomatic instruments are not drafted by poets; but poets live within the illusion of peaceful free choice that such protocols broker into the historical process. (24)

Freedom itself, which has, since the beginning of aesthetics as a discipline, remained attached to conceptualizations of artistic production and reception, is not taken for granted here. "The illusion of peaceful free choice" remains an illusion within poetry as well: the dramatization of the disappearing subject and the proliferation of imperious

commands in “Refuse Collection” is a representation of our own linguistically mediated unfreedom.

Prynne’s strongest statement in “A Quick Riposte” is as much a defense of language as it is—and this is the obvious *prima facie* impression—an indictment of language:

Human language in particular is not some innocent civilian victim too defenceless not to fall at the first waves of warlike assault somewhere within the system, when the handy concordat of moral reason starts to shatter; it sits at the tables where war is planned and social consciousness manipulated and it services the justification of war aims and the rescheduled debt provisions of just, patriotic, necessary and humanitarian terms of engagement. Not one word of any language ever known to man has ever been innocent of these things; just as no human body has ever submitted to be expressively at the complete disposal of the mind that inhabits it or the meanings which that mind claims to deploy. (“A Quick Riposte” 26)²⁷

The last sentence indicates the source of his vehemence: to reduce language to innocent victimhood is to deprive it of agency and to treat it as subservient to human will. The subordination of language to human action, for Prynne, is paralleled by the subordination of the body to the mind, which again presupposes the body’s animal or childlike naïveté. Only by affirming language’s culpability can it be imagined as anything other than the instrument of the mind that employs it: the insubordination of both language and the body are achieved through their inscription into history and consciousness. Innocence entails being written out of history. Philosophical discussions of complicity in both the analytic and the continental traditions tend to recognize the morally enabling quality of complicity. In *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid*, Mark Sanders uses Derrida’s

²⁷ While this statement might appear to be in the spirit of Adorno’s indictment of art, Prynne explicitly dissociates this analysis of language from the kind of post-Holocaust pronouncements that Adorno allowed himself to make. In fact, early in the essay we find a rejection of any specifically 20th-century argument: “[T]he history of Europe in this century is full of those terrible events supposed to have traduced or contaminated language, along with those sorrowful bystanders, perched upon some peak of purity, who can

analysis of Heidegger as an occasion to argue that an explicit acknowledgment of complicity in social injustice is a precondition for opposing that injustice (Sanders 11). Christopher Kutz arrives at a similar conclusion from the analytic perspective in *Complicity: Ethics and Law for a Collective Age*. He puts the case for complicity with remarkable clarity:

[T]he consolidation of social and economic life threatens the possibility of individual accountability. I believe the loss of a negative sense of individual accountability for harms also carries with it a loss of the positive individual sense of self. With respect to the collective harms that threaten our global age, all individual actions are essentially insignificant. These harms pose the great challenge to maintain a sense of the agency of individuals in a consolidated world. It may seem odd to turn for help to the counterideal of complicity. Surely, such edifying concepts as universal solidarity or cosmopolitan justice are more alluring. Reflection on complicity teaches us what it means to act together, when acting together goes badly. But the collective project of living ethically may find as great support in what it deplores as in what it prizes. The hidden promise of complicity is the conception of community upon which it draws: a world where individuals shape their lives with others, in love mixed with resentment, and in cooperation mixed with discord. Such a world is no utopia, which suggests that it can be made real. (258-59)

Though Prynne does not speak of complicity in utopian terms, the entire tendency of both his poetic and metapoetic engagements with this issue suggest that the refusal to articulate hope is a way of protecting a fierce hopefulness from language, which, as Oppen wisely warns, must be treated as the enemy.²⁸ In his lecture “Mental Ears and Poetic Work,” Prynne in fact excludes the stance of innocence from useful poetic production: “I have believed throughout my writing career that no poet has or can have clean hands, because clean hands are themselves a fundamental contradiction. Clean hands do no worthwhile work” (141).

bewail the loss of a model of rational, passionate and poetic discourse that would somehow resist the ruptures of historical process. But, how silly” (23).

²⁸ See page 167 of this chapter.

While insisting on complicity, Prynne is thus anxious to divest it of an accompanying pathos. The rhetoric of personal righteousness is perhaps only slightly more ideological than the rhetoric of personal culpability, and both can be used to facilitate the passage to power. In “Refuse Collection,” Prynne is characteristically aware of this risk inherent in any public self-accusation. Thus in the penultimate stanza of “Refuse Collection,” we find ventriloquized the logic by which penitence too becomes a means of preemptive attack: “this time ah yes right we / are the target let’s go faster now and self-abhor, / get there first.” The situation then appears impossible if what we seek is redemption through acknowledged fallenness. The awareness of complicity cannot be cashed in to collect absolution without implicating oneself further. The unremitting creativity of this poetry and its refusal to be gathered into states of stable coherence (or indeed incoherence) might, on the other hand, still constitute a viable model of vigilance.²⁹ The dialectical quality of difficulty might indeed perform the impossibility of resolutions and moral assurances.

However, Peter Riley—Prynne’s friend and fellow poet—has questioned the entire Frankfurt-style deification of difficulty as a moral principle.³⁰ In his 1979 review of

²⁹ Prynne himself understands vigilance in terms of textual density and artifice. Speaking of Douglas Oliver’s novel *The Harmless Building*, Prynne writes: “[*The Harmless Building*] was exhilarating to work with because it was so closely cross-woven and under control. That kind of intellectual deliberateness goes for maximum vigilance in the arena, all the tendons under multiple stress” (“From a Letter to Douglas Oliver” 152).

³⁰ Though it must be noted at the outset that Riley is himself not a writer of poetry that could be considered easy. For instance, James Keery exclaims in a notable aside in his essay on Riley’s *Ospita*: “Riley quotes from languages I don’t even recognize, let alone read, as in the epigraph to *Noon Province*: ‘Jag sjunger om det enda som försökar...!’” (“A Bearing Point on Hurt” 89). Similarly, John Freeman remarks: “The reader turns from his effort with [Riley’s *Five New Poems*] stimulated to a sense of being able to hew closer to the bone of his own mental and linguistic life. The cost is a labour which is, I find, not only arduous but psychologically stressful” (Freeman 25-26).

Also see Riley’s comments on the academicization of poetry; the final phrase qualifies and ironizes the rest of what he says, creating room for precisely that which he critiques:

It wasn’t so much the intrusion of the academy into current poetry, interference by interpretation becoming prescription; though there has been that. It was when the poets all stood up and said,

Douglas Oliver's *In the Cave of Suicession*, Riley takes up a skeptical attitude towards the notion of guilt, characterizing it as "the heart of duplicity and source of delay and ambition" ("Some Notes Marginal to Douglas Oliver's 'In the Cave of Suicession'" 186). Riley shares Prynne's distrust of language, not because of the acts that have been perpetrated in and through language, but because of the way language is experienced as a barrier to unmediated experience. Language is "duplicitous" because it can present experience only as counterfeit: "[D]irect perception does not exist, on the page, until the language invokes it and we are then at once engaged in a duplicity and indirectness" (180). Yet this awareness of the constitutive and at the same time deceptive nature of language does not lead inevitably to difficulty; in fact, simplicity can be an equally persuasive rejoinder to the simplifications of language (i.e., ideology):

We attack the false city of language best, it seems, by meeting its untrue (mechanic) simplicity concealing complexity of motive, with true simplicity revealing complexity of desire. Doug Oliver's work is outstanding for the way he can let the language move out to such startling simplicities as seem to strike right through to the cerulean overworld of redemption. Bolts against poetic and intellectual camouflage, the honesty and grace of foolishness, stupidity and embarrassment. (180)

Skepticism about language and its presumptions to truthful utterance does not generate uniform responses. In "A Quick Riposte," Prynne argues that there are only two ways out of perpetual self-deception: "The only workable alternatives are sainthood (model now discontinued) or the intense cultivation of dialectical consciousness" (25). While the literalism of Riley's earthliness would preclude an affirmation of sainthood, the possibility that the individual might transcend the whole and escape ideological determination is still alive in Riley's work:

"Hey, we're intellectuals too! We know all about Derrida and all that stuff, we're just like you . . . !" Or otherwise began to write as someone else said was necessary. That was what really wrapped the

We receive meaning from our company, who receive it from theirs, from history, and we bend it to our purposes. That it is possible (rather than “allowed” which is too schoolmasterly) by the conditions of the human entirety, as that by the astro-physical, is certain, as also that those reaches are themselves integral to sense, but the directions of movement in that circus are as we decide to appoint them, or leave them as an outer chaos. (Peter Riley to Keston Sutherland, The British Irish Poets List, 6 July 2000)

The recuperation of agency takes place here through positive rather than negative means, though in such formulations, agency constantly risks achieving a spurious reality as mere declaration rather than as performance and experience.

In a series of two letters published in the same number of the journal *Quid* in which Prynne’s ‘riposte’ to Handke appeared, Riley puts forward a recognizably humanist case against what might be the theoretical premises behind the peculiarly Cambridge variety of difficulty practiced by poets like Prynne, John Wilkinson, and a host of younger poets, Keston Sutherland being the most prominent among them (and Riley’s addressee in this context). Riley is navigating tricky terrain here, because he is attempting to deploy the “the honesty and grace” of an unsophisticated and ‘simple’ rhetoric as a corrective to what he considers an ultimately self-defeating theoretical sophistication. I provide a rather large quotation since all of it is relevant here:

Unlike the “floating avant-garde” which tells you to let it hang out and not to worry about either affirmation or denial, this poetry comes equipped with all the articulating devices of language which invite you to comprehend a connection and thus confirm, deny or extend it, but they come disabled. The sentence structure is precisely not abandoned but broken, so that everything you receive is interrupted and your interlocutor turns away mid-phrase as if to address someone else or the wall. Or there is a silence (a gap) which you cannot fill and when the language is resumed it has gone somewhere else, so far away that no trustable connection can be conceived, for it is not just a distance but also a barrier.³¹ Obviously this is

art in briars. I contest that all the time, and its contrary. (Interview with Keith Tuma 27)

³¹ Riley’s comments can be explained through Alan Halsey’s more sympathetically-phrased observations on Prynne’s *Down Where Changed*: “The approach of *Down where changed* [sic] is formal—poems composed of relatively short lines in stanzas of three lines each with occasional end-rhymes and half-rhymes [...]; thus it refers back to easily recognized poetic conventions with conventional expectations of meaning; its

painful, it is an assault. It is an assault not just on custom and courtesy, but also on the individual who, like it or not, is what reads the poetry.

It also offends, because it leaves the reader with no way of being—we can only be somewhere. It nullifies all the labour which goes into realising where you are and denies that that is a leverage on elsewhere. [...] It denies the reader's right of participation, it deadens thought, it declares an absolute, unprovable and undisprovable superiority over the reader in the entire realm of human mind-work. [...] It leaves the reader alone, subjugated, with nowhere to stand. The heroic poet floats off into the ether and is not seen again on this darkened earth.

There's no way I can see that this language experience motivates anyone towards ethical responsibility of any kind. ("Two Letters to British Poets" 19)

Like Ashbery, Riley is acutely aware that the reader's experience of difficult poetry might be painful rather than liberating. As a somewhat difficult poet himself and a highly perceptive reader of poetry, Riley is clearly ventriloquizing the plight of the reader who is factored out of the utopian rhetoric surrounding much avant-garde poetry. The negation of labor—the labor that goes into discovering one's own place in the world, as well as the labor that goes into a patient reading of a difficult poem when at the end you are told that meaning doesn't exist—seems to go against the entire "demand" for labor, which implies the production of value and the promise of remuneration. The desire for reward might be morally reprehensible, but only to those whose needs are met before they become desire. The power to demand labor and withhold satisfaction would then be mere injustice that cannot be romanticized and moralized as the "pain of unknowing," to use Prynne's phrase. The alternative model of playfulness—which permits the suspension of this economical model—might not be entirely "disabled" in Cambridge poetry, but is certainly indicated as one (and perhaps dishonorable) exit the reader could take from the difficulties of the poem.

effectiveness depends upon the disappointment of those expectations" (34). Or what Mellors says about Prynne, again in a congratulatory vein: "The brilliance of Prynne's poetry lies in the way its motility both gives and takes away the grounds for significance and reference" ("Mysteries of the Organism" 239).

Riley also vehemently rejects the argument from complicity. Referring to a phrase used by one of his fellow correspondents in the British-Irish Poetry List, Riley declares:

And by the way, the “nation which insists on continued sanctions against Iraq” is not a liberal democratic nation, democracy in particular having no part in the matter, and I am not a member of that nation and neither are you and we are not responsible for its acts, and in no way does an honest apprehension from a singular viewpoint of what I personally discover regarding alteriority whether in poetry or elsewhere involve me in a parallel structuring which endorses such a thing. (“Two Letters to British Poets” 14)

This explicit rejection of complicity and emphasis on the possibility of an individual point of view that can remain uncontaminated by the totalizing force of language and society, however, is worked out through a paradoxically weak sense of private personhood. “The I is a complex and dynamic thing which includes the view from outside in its very substance. Solipsism isn’t an error so much as a fantasy,” Riley declares (“Two Letters 12”). In fact, one of Riley’s earliest and continuing preoccupations is a mode of shared subjectivity that is not transcendental but grounded in the raw facticity of the human body. The rejection of an unrelenting difficulty is thus not a rejection of social being or shared responsibility; it is in fact a defense of the same collective being that makes the complicity argument possible. Thus Riley’s position can be seen as somewhat paradoxical: on the one hand, he has very little investment in the a-priori reality of a readymade self, and yet he has utmost respect for the self construed as a product of labor. In other words, it is the constructedness of the self that endows it with value, and the templates provided by ideology do not entirely account for the processes of definition and orientation that go into self-construction. Similarly, he rejects the lopsided negativity of the complicity argument: our collective being cannot be defined purely through its bleakest moments: this would be to reject the daily striving of individuals towards virtue,

however ideologically compromised. It should be obvious that Riley's position is not so much opposed to Prynne's as complementing it: Riley's insights are essentially the same, but he articulates them in a language less constricted by the fear that linguistic expression of hope might void the actual realization of hope.

In Riley's *Alstonefield: A Poem* (2001), the wanderings of the mostly singular speaker (he splits into two at one point in order to travel along two roads at the same time, however: no dilemma of "the road not taken" here) also contain recognitions of the difficulties of negotiating collectivity. Quite early on in *Alstonefield*, for instance, we find an explicit acknowledgement of the violence that constitutes the ineluctable background of the poem's rustic wanderings:

Serious message get on with your business.
Which is to be here in all kinds of weathers
and walk and walking trade my pulse for
notices of souldom in geophysical latitude
spurning the news. The politics of this
carries hope like a feather on the palm:
my country tracks are crossed in oil and
its inhering slaughter. (21)

What is obliquely suggested in "Refuse Collection" through the word "sole" appears in Riley in its proper morphological habit. The solitary speaker invokes the traditional option of the individual to withdraw—but only in terms of space and not of consciousness—from community in order to locate the soul. No reader of Riley's early prose, particularly his contributions to *The English Intelligencer*,³² would be surprised to see that the soul is for Riley blazoned upon landscape, which is itself part of the economy of the body: pulse traded for "notices of souldom." The soul, as "souldom," is a condition rather than a thing that might be lost or possessed. Yet the news is a constant distraction,

³² See Perril for an excellent reading of Prynne and Riley's mutual influence in *The English Intelligencer* project.

for it offers images of ourselves as remote and culpable. The lyric subject loosed upon the trails of the Peak District is then involved in a politics of lightweight hope, the feather upon rather than within the palm, so that the breath itself and its music imperil it. Hope is threatened not just through the news and its selective disaster tourism, but also as concrete experience: the oil on the roads and the slaughter it entails point to the first Gulf War, considering the date of the poem (c. 1995).³³ The fact that the poetic persona is walking rather than driving, however, offers the meager hope of a non-exploitative subjecthood whose self-awareness, like oil and coal, includes the geological strata of sedimented time. The awareness of complicity here is not as overpowering as it is in Prynne due to the linearity of the unhindered lyric utterance devoid of the extreme tensions of Prynne's poetry. Yet there are discreet rejections of both linearity and of the modest control affected by these lines, since the conjunction of "feather," "palm," and "oil" constitutes a rebus for another kind of slaughter: the destruction of tropical rainforests and its traditional inhabitants by aggressive cultivation of feathered palms to

³³ A similar inscription of violence in the scenery occurs at the end of *Alstonefield*, where the speaker refers to the "Rattle of the death- / camps in the stream-bed" (100). Such passages in Riley's poetry work against the veiled contempt that 'Marxist' poets like Keston Sutherland direct towards Riley's poetry. Consider the following passage from Sutherland's "The Accomplishment of Knowing One's Place"; he is discussing place as it is imagined in Riley's work:

Its place is not a public place, though members of the public might take great pleasure in being led there. It is not a public place, because the public is conceivable only within and exceeding a State structure; Riley's poetry neither wishes nor attempts to understand itself as the kind of intellectual labour which happens as something included ineluctably within a State. It does not focus on any of the State's locations, but diverts insight from them. In fact, I would go so far as to say that Riley doesn't really believe that States are anything more than the aggregates of economic and financial management, together with the bodies of divided sovereignty whose principal purpose is to keep that management competitive. That is to say, he excludes from the concept "State" the population subject to organized authority. (138)

Compare John Freeman's more insightful response to Riley's *Five New Poems*: "In Peter Riley's *Five New Poems*, the personal can appear almost cosily domestic, but derision is warded off by the location of this 'indulgence' in the war zone, in which the value of personal truth and love is to be grimly and intelligently defended against the encroachment of a hostile environment" (Freeman 23). For another sensitive reading of the concept of place in Riley's poetry, see Ian Davidson's *Ideas of Space in Contemporary Poetry* 37-39; Davidson is cognizant of the simultaneity of public and private concerns in Riley.

produce palm oil, which too is an important component in the automobile industry.³⁴

Yet the ambiguity is delicate and unobtrusive, as if it has not yet earned the right to demand attention even though it rewards attention, and always willing to resolve itself into the ideogrammatic felicity of the physical resemblance between palm leaves and feathers.

The immense geological and historical timescales that ground contemporary experience offer for Riley modes of being that constitute a necessary counterpoint to the exigencies and despair of the present. Riley's most strident rejection of complicity in its late-Marxist version occurs later on in the poem, where the social contract, along with economic determinism, is explicitly rejected:

But the economy
is not what we live, the economy is our enemy,
casting us into a future of empty tombs, grey
prairies scattered with Disneylands eating their own

Flesh for lunch as if a market could be its own motor
and spit itself to the top privilege without someone
somewhere footing the entire account. We refuse to die
into this economy. The songs carried in slow centuries
bear purpose larger and more singular than state, and
turn the benefits back to earth offering an escape route
to central distances where despair and love build cairns
on the horizon and passion lights bonfires in hollows of
bankrupt night. (*Alstonefield* 74)

Here it would appear that Riley is claiming for poetry the state of exemption that Prynne categorically denied it, and advancing a conviction that the social sphere can and must be broken into competing communities. Without sufficient irony, the first person plurals that populate this declaration point to the danger that inheres in any such speech on

³⁴ Though the current outcry against the destruction of rainforests and wildlife for oil palm cultivation began only in the 2000s, the general problem had become apparent in the late 1980s. For example, see

behalf of another. As Robert Sheppard warns, “The use of the first person plural is [...] a moralistic embrace. [It] effects a rhetorical assimilation of the reader, which is in many ways unethical” (22). Riley’s lines seek to avoid interpellating the reader by dispersing themselves into lyric registers whose inherited forms replicate the givenness of the earth. Also, the community he imagines includes the cairn, in which human remains are overlaid with an accumulation of stones. This community of stones, as object of lyric, offsets the overt invitation to uncritical participation: the ancient dead and the inert stones that keep them company hardly constitute an unethical seduction into an idealized community.

Riley’s *Excavations* (2004) can be read as an experiment in imagining poetry and community from the cultural assimilation of death which constitutes the site of the individual’s dissolution into the purely social realm of signification. A large proportion of the material for this sequence is drawn from 19th-century excavation reports of Early Bronze Age burial mounds in England. Real and invented Elizabethan lyrics and Riley’s own inventions are woven into the text to create points of reference in the chronologically receding perspective. The appearance of the text is intended to declare the presence of disparate registers and selves, and the prefatory note informs the reader, not without straight-faced humor, that about 90% of the text in italics “represent quotation from the archeological sources, usually in fragmented and not necessarily exact quotation, but there is a 10% anarchic principle within which they can also be anything else. This proportion is greater with **bold**, which basically represents quotation (or feigned quotation) from old texts, the majority 16th or 17th centuries lyrics in English” (6). Here, for example, is section 61 in its entirety:

John Myrick Ashley’s “The Social and Environmental Effects of the Palm-Oil Industry in the Oriente of Ecuador” (October 1987).

separately, but all on the same axis *two adults and two children* NE-SW As if there were an answer pending, the first person plural created by music, set at recognition. Diagonal, as “we” offer the crown in an image of sacrifice, a sharp crown. Then the third child, *a baby at an adult’s feet* **I heard a maiden** is set across, NW-SE **singing** of how fragile the arteries and consequent reticence, of how fertile the cuticle. Then the wide wilderness of what **still shall be** where strange fruit hang, gather the flesh, up into one raveling cry. (71)

Typographical markers scrupulously delineate boundaries; individuality needs to be marked out precisely when the individual cannot be extricated from the collective. This passage demonstrates some of the complexities generated by Riley’s attempt to salvage a notion of a non-ideological individual who is also exempt from responsibility for collective actions. The first-person singular appears in **bold**, signalling that its presence is not a moment of enhanced and authentic speech but an echo of historically remote constructions of subjectivity. The first-person plural enters, on the other hand, in normal fonts but ensconced within scare-quotes as it enacts a scene of falsely attributed guilt. “We” are Christ’s executioners here, and the “strange fruit” can then be the body of Christ on the tree of the cross. The context of Christianity evokes its complex tradition of guilt whose climax is Christ’s appropriation of communal and original sin as personal suffering. The paradoxes within which Riley’s poem moves trace the instability and mutability of singular and plural first-person subject positions: they are both inextricable from history, and both lyric purity and redemptive collectivity have to be ultimately marked out through irony as artifactual and provisional.

In an eloquent passage in *Alstonefield*, Riley again seeks direction from the standard turns of lyric address, but finally allows uncertainty and difficulty to take over:

And yet the days
to come hold no terror but the world’s own, how
to work kindness across the gap between one and
many in the light of the fading eye. O for a craft of

wholeness dictating every detail, finish, grace-note,
surety woven across the night and curving straight
into day, shadow's edge doubled in travertine.
Refusing collectivising aids. The delicate brushwork
of the soul courtiers proposes a republic. (34)

The task of bridging the gap between the particular and the general, projections of individual consciousness and returning intimations of plural being, is approached through kindness—not just the affect but also the quality of similitude. The opposition between an ideal wholeness that bridges dualism and the ideological imputation of collectivization breaks down, however, into linguistic uncertainty and error that cast their shadows upon the preceding heroic proposals. Language's slip into possible grammatical confusion in the last line—"courtiers proposes"—represents the arduous passage from the soul to the republic. "The delicate brushwork" is the singular antecedent of the verb "proposes," but the contiguity of the plural noun and the singular verb, augmented by the strangeness of the phrase "soul courtiers"—questions the sureties that the poem seeks but cannot find. The homophonic affinity of "soul" to singularity again foregrounds the problem of number, of an illegitimate mingling of the singular and the plural in the phrase "soul courtiers," the putative producer of the brushwork if the sentence is to hold together. But 'to courtier' also means to woo, so that the word "proposal" acquires matrimonial overtones. Grammatical number becomes as intransigent as our own numerical quandaries of singularity and multiplicity, just as the republic gets routed back into private and sexual desire. But of course complexity does not redeem guilt; it is only a moment in the fluctuations of power relations within the text and its engagements with the world, and so difficulty has to give way, again, to forms of coherence such as the one that this reading of the poem just created.

It is not easy or perhaps truthful to stop at complicity, but leaving behind the accumulated effects of direct and remote intention can seem even more inauthentic and self-serving. ‘Collect’ has been historically associated with fundraising for the church; it has firm links with structures of power that continue to shape the collective histories of communities. To refuse collection as well as collectivization is a necessary preliminary gesture in the engagement with complicity, which is predicated upon our irrevocable social pacts that persist beyond the conscious life of the body. Both Prynne and Riley often find community most congenial when it is constituted outside structures of power or even humanity: Prynne’s early poetry shows particular interest in refuse in the nominal sense of the word, paralleling Riley’s longstanding preoccupation with burial and the social relevance of human remains.³⁵ But language and its ruthless inclusivity enmesh even the most agile navigator, and freedom cannot be imagined either as liberation through language or of language. The social is neither fact nor its opposite, and a highly evolved sense of balance is necessary in order not to fall into the pitted lines that compete for what might still constitute our souldom. Riley’s passionate refusal, for instance, to be absorbed into the community of capitalist economy is complicated by his refusal to renege entirely from communally-dictated modes of signification. Prynne, on the other hand, accepts collective being, including its unsavory consequences, for felt personal

³⁵ See in particular Riley’s “Working Notes on British Prehistory or Archaeological Guesswork One.” The form of burial practiced by Neolithic communities in Britain attracts Riley on account of its lack of emphasis on the human individual and the soul. The practice of burying the dead “by inhumation, COLLECTIVELY, in a structure based on house [sic], covered by a mound or earth or stones—long or round according to date and influences—which became a permanent feature of the landscape” indicates for Riley a “community of flesh” in which “human flesh wasn’t a personal and singular *private* possession, but something in its nature *shared* [...]. And what’s lived as entity is buried as entity, together, as a feature of the landscape which itself shared in this communion” (239). He also rejects the idea that such burials involved the concept of a soul. Arguing from the fact that internment in mounds usually occurred after the flesh had fallen off from the bones, he claims: “Not so much, I think, that the soul was bound in the flesh and only departed when the flesh did, but that only flesh itself was to be revered as of life, that true death did

goodness, but despite his unflagging commitment to the performance of linguistic complicity, he is unconcerned about the failure of his poems to address the entirety of the human collective through a lapse into semantic clarity. The solutions may not be as multifarious as we might like to believe, but the nerve centers of language, we must believe, record vistas made visible through these poetries; their transfer along the charged highways of consciousness must illumine, at some point, the sole light of the soul.

Difficult poetry, as I indicated in chapter 1, exists in a particularly tense relationship with society. By violating norms of communication, such poetry destabilizes the laws of human communities that create and are created by language. It is easy for writers of difficult poetry to interpret this transgression as signalling complete freedom from social constraints, and to wear difficulty as a badge of relinquished social participation and as the augur of utopia. The poets discussed in this chapter attempt in their separate ways to resist such easy heroism, locating themselves instead in the negative moral space of complicity. The ambiguities of difficult poetry are often used—and this is particularly true of Prynne—to stage the complex condition of complicity, in which the notion of doing itself is called into question. Difficulty, like its opposite, does not guarantee critical distance. Yet the extreme self-consciousness of language within the arena of difficulty might indicate a salutary caution that takes very little for granted, especially the innocence and neutrality of language.

not occur until the flesh was gone. Life *was* flesh, and departed from the bones by a natural process to rejoin the community in rebirth” (239).

CHAPTER 5

THINKING THROUGH DIFFICULTY

All the work of the hand is rooted in thinking. Therefore
thinking itself is man's simplest, and for that reason
hardest, handiwork.

—Martin Heidegger, "What Calls for Thinking?"¹

The increasing self-reflexivity of the work of art in the twentieth century can be positively correlated with its corresponding obscurity. Art's desire to know itself within its own conditions of being must contend with the aporetic nature of self-knowledge, and its difficulty is at least in part then a performance of this knowing. Ashbery's work, for instance, is typical of the postmodern tendency to stop and attempt to address its own inscrutability. The self-reflexive passage in "The Skaters"—discussed in chapter 2—is a relatively early but typical example. At a developed level of self-consciousness, poetry has been extraordinarily interested in questions of philosophy: this is not just a secondary interest, but integral to poetry's affinity to knowing. Understood as artifact—and I use this term in Veronica Forrest-Thomson's sense, which I will presently expand upon—the poem is already known, at least by the poet. But a concurrent impulse to philosophize through poetry and poetics emerges from a conception of the task of poetry as somehow exceeding the brief of artifice, since it is not only enough for the poet to produce an aesthetic object, but also to be aware that each creative gesture might be a cognitive act as well. The paradox of this position now as in the early nineteenth century is that 'philosophical' poetry appears precisely when philosophy itself as a technique of

¹ *Basic Writings* 381.

knowledge-production is under severe doubt, and its habitats highly limited due to competition with an objectivized and instrumentalized ‘science.’ But as the philosophical burr, once firmly attached to the poetic mantle, has not shown any clear signs of gracefully falling off, poets with a tendency towards theorization have approached their task with strong misgivings: the twentieth-century critique of metaphysics has, of course, not helped to lighten the poet’s task. The art object cannot merely replicate the bland homogeneity of resistance: if it resists intelligibility, it can and indeed must engage the instruments and methods of intelligibility while doing so; otherwise it reduces itself into a mere parody of the *ding an sich*, that obscure object of bourgeois-scientific desire.

The incipient linguistic constructivism in Romantic philosophy created conditions under which the linguistic creativity of poetry could turn poetry into a privileged site for the reconfiguration of knowledge and representation. The following statement is a significant instance of the radical epistemic shifts that accompanied the political radicalism of the latter half of the eighteenth century: “I am now convinced that the highest act of reason, by encompassing all ideas, is an aesthetic act, and that *truth and goodness* are only siblings in *beauty*. The philosopher must possess as much aesthetic power as the poet” (Hölderlin 186). This remark appears in a fragment believed to have been the outcome of discussions between Hegel, Schelling, and Hölderlin in 1796, and represents the possibility—which continues to tempt philosophers and poets up to the present—that poetry might offer the definitive paradigm of unified and ‘organic’ knowledge.² It also indicates the risk intrinsic to conceiving the task of poetry in terms of

² Robert Kaufman points out the relationship between Frankfurt-School formalism and the Romantic conception of organic form: “Benjamin develops this ideal of exact, imaginative, in-motion form largely through his formidable engagements with the formidable artists of the Baudelairean lyric countertradition. Benjamin’s formulation also stands as one of the great modernist, constructivist reimaginings of that

philosophy. Subordinated to metaphysics, poetry and art might be treated as philosophical tools, to be discarded once philosophy establishes total control over all forms of knowledge and being—which is what happens in Hegel’s mature philosophy. It therefore becomes increasingly important for poetry to retain its creative prerogative while arguing for a distinctive and autonomous poetic language that can remain separate from other modes of language use.

From this perspective, the conflict between the positions represented by Prynne and Riley in the previous chapter can be expressed in terms of an opposition between poetic language as unprotected by the fiat boundaries that separate art from socio-political domains (Prynne), and poetic language as distinct from instrumentalized language and capable of relative innocence (Riley). The question of complicity arises, I have argued, in the context of agency. And agency, I have suggested, is an enabling condition, and is usually well worth the trouble of incurring the blame. However, this imposes on art a model of selfhood that is identical to that of the sovereign human subject: fallen but self-aware and without illusions. Yet if art is not merely an instrument to reach out to the not-human but is itself also an instance of the non-human, then it can never be fully integrated into the social sphere nor be made to replicate a particular concretization of human subjectivity. Even when assigned to self-governing reservations—as various ‘autonomy’ theories do—art’s otherness requires that such enclaves are also challenged and exceeded by what might be the genuine inhumanity of art, which alone ultimately renders it a meaningful activity: hence for Paul Celan, poetry,

familiar old lyric-aesthetic friend whom it thereby radically reinvents: organic form. In Adorno’s musical formulation such constructivist reimagining of what is still really organic form appears, in advanced modernity, as the simultaneously dissociative and structural principle of dissonant composition” (Kaufman 149-50).

robots and monkeys occupy the same realm (“The Meridian,” *Collected Prose* 43). The autonomy argument has always implicitly tended towards this awareness of art’s otherness, though it has sometimes been expressed in terms of an elitism replete with images of grandiose and moneyed isolation (towers and castles abound in art’s medieval landscapes), and sometimes presents itself as a necessary exile that alone facilitates social critique. Both the anti-social and social descriptions, however, do not make explicit the a-sociality that is also inherent to art—the fact that it is profoundly historical, but is at the same time also immune to history.

This immunity is a necessary precondition for any aesthetic activity: without it, the creative artist merely reproduces society and its contradictions, and irony would remain the only authentic mode of self-consciousness for art. As my readings would have suggested, the poetry of both Prynne and Ashbery frequently appears tethered to the ironic impasse. But a distinction has to be made at this stage between an ethic of poetic production—which, for Prynne, involves dialectical consciousness and an abiding skepticism about the freedom and good intentions of the author—on the one hand, and the ontology of the artwork on the other. The art object is no doubt deeply implicated in the conditions of its production, reception, and interpretation, but at the same time cannot be reduced to those conditions. Yet the artwork is also not merely a ‘resistance’ that escapes sensory (or political) determination either. Its otherness might be provisionally understood through the notion of form, which for Adorno was the only ‘anti-barbaric’ aspect of art, enabling it to become a critique of its own empirical social conditions (*Aesthetic Theory* 143). Poetry’s existence as a formal construct thus signals the exteriority that it acquires, paradoxically, through human design. If poetry can speak back

to the poet and the world from which it emerges, the speech must be enabled by form, since form is the basis of its claim to both being and difference.

The explicit politicization of art might therefore be irrelevant, after all, to what art might be really capable of doing. A-political art, mimetic art, and so-called 'traditional' art all necessarily perform this otherness through formal means. This is the partial reason for the fact that all claims about art's political and transformative impact, usefulness, 'critical' force, and so forth ultimately appear irrelevant and inadequate. I am not saying that such claims should not or cannot be made, but that they can only allegorize intuitions about what art might be doing, and generally fail as empirically valid explanations: as Gertrude Stein has pointed out, composition alone might contain a measure of truthfulness as explanation.³ As an envoy to the realm of otherness, not only does art tend towards silence, as Celan suggests, but also demands silence of those who experience it. While this demand is not usually legally binding (as it is in, for instance, Judaism), much of the garrulousness surrounding the appreciation and interpretation of art is uncomfortably aware of the silences that cluster around art and seem to constitute an alternative language. (The need for silence might also be intuited, as this author does, through the experience of starting out to say something profound about art and ending up trapped between the Scylla of Heidegger and the Charybdis of Adorno.)

Difficulty's particular vulnerability to theorization, combined with the redundancy of any metapoetic statement to its corresponding poetry, has created a somewhat spectacular conflict of interests that might be read as directed towards an anti-philosophy that preserves the intensely pleasurable experience of thinking as an activity that is inherent to the encounter with poetic difficulty. It has been a particular virtue of

twentieth century philosophy—particularly of Martin Heidegger’s later work—to acknowledge this shared space and to utilize poetry’s method, or lack of it, as a heuristic instrument, effectively transforming in the process both the form and content of philosophy. But even in this chastened form, philosophy presents a somewhat suspicious will to power with which poets are not necessarily required to engage. Though poetic artifice, in its intransigent concreteness, can appear to be a salutary counterpoint to poetry’s tendency towards hyperbolic self-affirmation, artifice itself has a tendency to spread out from a limited notion of language as mere tool or medium to the domain of *logos*—which is reason, but also both language and thought. Poetic artifice implies a remaking of knowledge as such, particularly due to the crucial role that language plays in human representations; this ‘constructivist’ aspect of poetry has been of greatest interest to the poets I will discuss below. Poetry’s expansion into thought is thus a natural development, but one that also necessitates rearticulating thought in terms of poetry if poetry is not to be overrun by the crassly reductive troupes of metaphysical categories. The post-Romantic exacerbation of difficulty in poetry can therefore be attributed to the conjunction of a partially contradictory set of tendencies: the designation of poetry as a site of knowledge production akin to, and even superior to philosophy, and as uniquely equipped to transform social relations because of the pervasive linkages between social and linguistic formations; the simultaneous and foundational seductiveness of poetic craft whose problems of composition are not coterminous with its socio-cultural and cognitive ambitions; and the need to reconcile these tendencies without succumbing to traditional logical and epistemic formulations that would automatically make poetry subservient to philosophy.

³ I am alluding to Stein’s lecture “Composition as Explanation” here.

In this chapter, I examine two zones of concentrated poetic self-reflection that happens via difficulty: the Cambridge School of poets and the American Language poets. While the surfeit of metatextual material produced by Language poets are public knowledge, and are actually more widely known and distributed than their poetry, theory has proceeded more discreetly in Cambridge circles.⁴ Exchanges in the semi-private worksheet *The English Intelligencer*,⁵ which served as a platform for Cambridge poets to share work in progress, clearly indicate the impact of Olsonian poetics on the Cambridge scene, but no manifestos or other declarations of group identity were forthcoming. Intellectualism and pedantry were nevertheless rampant, even amongst poets like Peter Riley who found Prynne's brand of difficulty excessive and ultimately untenable. Riley's long tract on archeology, for instance, dominated an issue of *The English Intelligencer* (he was also the editor of the second series of the worksheet). Prynne's essay "Resistance and Difficulty," which I have discussed in chapter 3, is an early and rare glimpse into his massive forays into philosophy, history, anthropology, politics, and the hard sciences that constructs some of the fretwork for his poetic texts. His eloquent letters to fellow poets provide a clearer sense of the intensity with which he is willing to theorize the principles of poetry, to use Olson's term. Veronica Forrest-Thomson, who was tutored by J.H.

⁴ *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, collects key theoretical texts. "Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto," jointly written by Ron Silliman, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Steve Benson, Bob Perelman, and Barrett Watten provides a summary of major theoretical positions. The collected essays of many of the important members of the group have also been published as standalone books. A partial list: Barrett Watten's *Total Syntax* and *The Constructivist Moment*, Charles Bernstein's *Content's Dream*, Steve McCaffery's *North of Intention*, Ron Silliman's *The New Sentence*, Robert Perelman's *The Marginalization of Poetry*, and Lyn Hejinian's *The Language of Inquiry*. Veronica Forrest-Thomson's *Poetic Artifice* is an important, though rare, effort on a similar scale by a Cambridge poet; *Lyric Touch*—John Wilkinson's collection of essays—also seems to be gaining in influence. The recent compendium of contributions to *The English Intelligencer*—*Certain Prose of the English Intelligencer*—edited by Neil Pattison and others indicates Cambridge poetry's interest in tracing the evolution of its own theoretical assumptions.

⁵ Some of the contributions to this worksheet were recently collected in *Certain Prose of the English Intelligencer* edited by Neil Pattison et. al.

Prynne, is one of the most brilliant minds to have emerged from this milieu. Journals like *Grosseteste Review* and more recently *Parataxis* have served as platforms for increasingly vocal Cambridge scholar-poets, of whom Simon Jarvis and Keston Sutherland are significant for the discussion that follows.

It must be stated at the outset that I do not plan to provide an overview of all the poets associated with the two groups. By the time I am finished, it will be evident that group distinctions are inessential for the questions at hand, except where they help to vivify certain areas of contention—and I have tried rather hard to ensure that this is not a head-to-head comparison of two groups of poets who have had their disagreements and mostly choose to ignore each other.⁶ What this chapter does, therefore, can be better described as an enquiry into the ways in which difficult poetry intersects with the search

⁶ But only ‘mostly,’ and the response to Language Poetry from non-Cambridge poets was much more sympathetic. For instance, in the June 1980 issue of *Reality Studios* that introduced poets of the British underground to Language Poetry, the London-based poet and publisher Ken Edwards approvingly quotes Steve McCaffery’s statement that “At its core, linguistic reference is a displacement of human relationships and as such is fetishistic in the Marxian sense” (*Death of the Referent?* 63). Later university-based reviewers, who often took a less celebratory stance, nevertheless continued to applaud the revolutionary ambitions of the poetry. Peter Middleton begins his article on Language Poetry by acknowledging its considerable achievements:

The emergence of a politically sophisticated radical poetry in the United States, a poetry popularly known as “Language Poetry,” has been one of the most exciting cultural developments of the past two decades. Not since the thirties has there been such a sense of aesthetics and politics converging in explicit projects, whether poems, publishing, or dialogues with those engaged in other more evidently political struggles. Many of the poets have helped construct a formidable body of theoretical discussion that not only situates the work and its interventions, but provides a form of resistance to its easy consumption as an object in need of external mediation by institutions of interpretative validation. (242)

Similarly Geoffrey Ward says in his pamphlet *Language Poetry and the American Avant-garde* (published by the British Association of American Studies in 1993):

Here [in the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*] were to be found: a project for massive social change; a collective project to write and to analyze poetry in relation to the impact of European theory; and the attempt to yoke the two under a repertoire of poetic styles that claimed antecedents in Ashbery, Russian Futurism and *Tender Buttons*. [...] Their work and the questions it raises form a standing rebuke to the prevailing mediocrity of America’s cultural output during the Reagan and Bush administrations. (Ward 15-16)

While obviously welcoming the Language group’s attempt to develop a politically robust poetry and Marxist theory of language, British poet-critics have generally tended to be rather dissatisfied with the results of the experiment. J.H. Prynne’s “Letter to Steve McCaffery” is the most extended and thoughtful—but critical—

for non-exploitative, anti-metaphysical modes of thought. Yet the occasional splitting of this dialogue across inevitably essentialist group boundaries offers the possibility of tracing a transatlantic dialogue that might bring some human interest into the proceedings. It might be added at this point that poetry's cognitive value might to an uncertain extent be measured in terms of its own self-recognitions as facilitated by theoretical statements by the authors themselves. All the caveats about authorial intention developed in the nether half of the twentieth century must of course be promptly repeated here; yet the entire methodology of this dissertation would have already indicated that it is in no way hostile to accepting in good faith what the authors, as witnesses—however unreliable—to the birth of the poem, might have to report.

Artifice and the Avant-Garde

The combination of decentralized subjectivity and revolutionary intent typical of Language Poetry in its early stages need not mix well with the concept of the artifact, particularly the idea of a politically neutral and transhistorical set of skills and conventions that characterize a particular craft. The anti-art spirit of Dada, it had seemed, had temporarily excised the bourgeois notion of artifice from the body-poetic, and periodic efforts have been made to replicate (though mostly as farce) this moment of triumphant self-negation.⁷ Language Poetry's rejection of a coherent and cohesive poetic voice and thematic unity notwithstanding, it is ultimately the 'madness' of the art object that confirms its status as a deliberate human intervention in a human universe. This making

response to Language Poetry from the Cambridge poets. (Geoffrey Ward, whose work I quote above, is also connected to the Cambridge scene.)

is hard to disengage from intention, and when intention and craft are successfully occluded, the ‘art’ status of the resulting object becomes questionable. Thus we find Charles Bernstein dismissing ‘craft’ at one point only to reinstate it at another. Consider the following statement from the essay “State of the Art”: “As if poetry were a craft that there is a right way or a wrong way to do: in which case, I prefer the wrong way—anything better than the well-wrought epiphany of predictable measure—for at least the cracks and flaws and awkwardnesses show signs of life” (2). The reasoning is obviously flawed: why should a cracked and flawed and awkward urn be a stronger signifier of life than the well-wrought one?⁸ (Cracked or not, the urn is a repository of the ashes of the dead, and as such cannot be expected to be an advertisement for life.) The sentimental attachment to the pathos of flawed existence is typically Romantic, however, as I shall show in my forthcoming discussion on error as a heuristic device in Charles Bernstein.

But Bernstein’s comments on Silliman’s poetry in the early essay “Stray Straws and Straw Men” seem to contradict his distrust of craft and artifice. He observes here that “[Silliman’s] poetry emphasizes its medium as being constructed, rule governed, everywhere circumscribed by grammar and syntax, chosen vocabulary: designed, manipulated, picked, programmed, organized, & so an artifice, artifactual—monadic, solipsistic, homemade, manufactured, mechanized & formulaic at some points: willful” (*L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* 39). In the same essay he again emphasizes the ‘technicality’ of poetry: “‘Technical artifice’ they scream, as if poetry doesn’t demand a technical precision. (‘That poetry is an art, an art with technique, with media, an art that must be in constant flux, a constant change of manner.’) Technicians of the human”

⁷ Avant-gardists have their own moment of ironic self-regard, of course, as in Robert Perelman’s witty description of ‘avant-garde’ as an “ancient poetic adjective” (*The Marginalization of Poetry* 9).

(*L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* 40). It is particularly worth noting that Bernstein makes these claims extolling artifice to dismiss the charge that Silliman's poetry was produced by automatic writing: technicality becomes important precisely when the deliberateness of the poem and its eligibility to be included under the rubric of 'art' are under scrutiny.⁹ Incidentally, Bernstein's humanization of the sacred—for the phrase "Technicians of the human" evokes *Technicians of the Sacred*, Jerome Rothenberg's anthology of poetry and incantations from non-modernized and oral cultures—indicates his wariness of the magical uses of language in which the artifact interlocks with the world into which it is introduced and renegotiates the terms of its reality. And this is despite the fact that the relationship between the word and the world espoused by Language Poetry always verges on a quasi-mystical late-Marxist notion of art (not craft) as privileged praxis and proxy politics ("what it does," not "what it means") that cannot afford to be genuinely compromised or challenged by the 'other' of Western rationalism. The marginality of someone like Gary Snyder to the Language movement is entirely consistent with its emphatically Occidental affiliations.¹⁰

⁸ Bernstein's implied target is of course Cleanth Brooks' classic New Critical text, *The Well Wrought Urn*.

⁹ A similar ambivalence can be found in the work of other Language poets. In "Experimental Writing, or, Writing the Long Work," Bernadette Mayer declares that in the writing workshop, "Craft & Technique are analyzed only in the light of the revelation of tricks, in the traditional sense" (Baker 7). Here craft is associated with artifice in the negative sense, as duplicity, so that an honest poetic will reveal those tricks.

¹⁰ Bernstein's variant acknowledges the pervasive influence that "ethnopoetics" has had on the reinvention of American poetry after the Second World War: Language Poetry in itself was in its early stages sponsored by *Alcheringa*, the journal of ethnopoetics that Rothenberg founded with David Tedlock. In 1975, Silliman edited for *Alcheringa* the work of nine poets now associated with the Language group (Silliman, "The Dwelling Place: 9 Poets"). See Tedlock's strongly critical account of Language Poetry in "The Relationship between Ethnopoetics and Language Poetry." Interestingly, in *Jacket 2*, a Language-Poetry-controlled successor to John Tranter's highly reputed *Jacket* magazine, Tedlock offers an introduction to *Alcheringa* (which has been reissued through *Jacket 2*) that covers a similar terrain but edits out some of his stronger criticisms of Language Poetry, redirecting them instead towards Poststructuralism in general ("Dreamtime"). It is also noteworthy that the first issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* contained extracts from prose texts by Rothenberg. The first issue contains other indications of an early overlap between Language Poetry and sacred/hermetic traditions. For instance, this is how McCaffery describes his book *Carnival*: "The roots of *Carnival* go beyond concretism (specifically that branch of concrete poetry termed the 'typestract' or abstract typewriter art) to labyrinth and mandala, and all related archetypal forms that

Thus while Language Poetry, and all poetry that seeks to be revolutionary in some sense, has to accede to the status of poetry as a made object crisscrossed by intentions and occasions, the delegitimizing specter of sterile formalism sets up an opposition between the craft of poetry and what might be called the task of poetry. This dilemma in no way involves the valorization of content over form, however. As Lyn Hejinian insightfully observes in her classic essay “The Rejection of Closure,” “[T]he conjunction of *form* with radical *openness* may be what can offer a version of the ‘paradise’ for which writing often yearns” (Hejinian 42). In the “open text” as it is defined by Hejinian,¹¹ form is connected to process rather than product, and instead of qualities of traditional poetic form—meter, rhyme, alliteration, tropes, mental and emotional attitudes, and stock

emphasize the use of visual qualities in language to defend a sacred centre” (Introduction to *Carnival* Panel 2, n.p.). McCaffery had been published in *Alcheringa* long before Language Poetry took off (“The Relationship between Ethnopoetics and Language Poetry” 125; see McCaffery’s “Drum Language and the Sky Text”). Bernstein distances himself from ethnopoetry’s sympathetic approach to world-views in which the distinction between poetic and vatic utterance is weak or non-existent. The shamanic poet—one who negotiates, through precise technique, the human and the spirit or spiritual worlds—has been one of the dominant celebrants of difficulty. The world of visions and dreams, seen not as the result of a wayward consciousness but as the manifestation of alternate and sometimes temporally dislocated realities, harbours a dense world of symbols and portents that are contiguous with poetic language. This is a space that poetry can always occupy, but only at the risk of ceding its identity to religion, which has been bereft in recent times of linguistic enrichment and elaboration. An all-out ‘death-of-the-author’ position has no trouble with such a version of the author, and Barthes himself cites the shamanic performances as instances of authorless literary production. In “The Death of the Author,” Barthes observes:

[I]n ethnographic societies the responsibility for a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman or relator whose ‘performance’—the mastery of the narrative code—may possibly be admired but never his ‘genius’. The author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the ‘human person.’ (*Image, Music, Text* 142-43)

As Bernstein’s comments suggest, the term ‘human’ is preferable to the ‘sacred’; the shamanic mode cannot be invoked now without the exculpating caveat of irony. Perhaps the most signal instance of Language Poetry’s divided attitude towards oracular utterance is the following passage in his preface to *Content’s Dream*. “A friend disclaims an intent inferred—‘the gossamer wings of thought’; I would have said bats’ waves of sound. Such alternatives seem more oracular and exclusionary than ‘straight’ talk, so that the very process of getting away from authoritarian language use may be rejected for creating its own occult authority” (10).

¹¹ Hejinian defines “the open text” as one in which “all the elements of the work are maximally excited; here it is because ideas and things exceed (without deserting) argument that they have taken into the dimension of the work” [sic]; the “closed text,” on the other hand, “is one in which all the elements of the work are directed toward a single reading of it” (Hejinian 43, 42).

personae—we have a carefully updated list: process, temporality, repetition, juxtaposition, parallelisms, dynamism (Hejinian, “The Rejection of Closure,” *passim*). The rhetoric of disruption and resistance that turns difficult poetry into a revolutionary act for the Language poets nevertheless makes it difficult for poets to conceive of poetic difficulty as anything but political, even though in actual practice they do evolve relatively non-difficult modes of political praxis and confrontation as well. In fact, the excessive polemical certainties that placed a disproportionately great emphasis on formal techniques that are themselves disengaged from their histories in the interests of a political idealism can be taken as responsible for the rhetorical impoverishment of Language Poetry. While Hejinian can assert that “the poem *is* a mind” (44), the Language poem, as it is articulated by practitioners like Silliman, seems to be a mind whose freedom and range are arbitrarily restricted: even when language is used unconventionally, formulaic methods and patterns route the poem back to habit and convention. The problem might be that the intelligence that is clearly at work in the theoretical writings is ultimately distrustful of itself and has therefore turned poetry into the antithesis of polemic, so that the fertile thought and the arid poetry become mutually exclusive mirror images of each other.¹² Attempts to merge poetry and poetics, as in “Artifice of Absorption” (to be discussed below), Perelman’s “The Marginalization of Poetry,” and

¹² Hence, for instance, Silliman projects images of class struggle on to the contentless forms of mathematical number series. According to Silliman, “The most important aspect of the Fibonacci number series [was] the fact that it begins with two ones. That not only permitted the parallel articulation of two sequences of paragraphs, but also determined that their development would be uneven, punning back to the general theory of class struggle” (“Interview” 35). Charles Altieri as usual does a commendable job of pointing out what ought to be obvious in claiming political efficacy for such techniques: “What kind of an ‘image’ is this and what possible force can it have? At best it is a picture of an idea or an analogy to another abstraction which has only a minuscule claim on either feelings or intellect. Does the ability to manipulate these sequences, or even to make formal literary analogies for them, demonstrate anything at all about actual class struggle or intensify the reader’s hopes and commitments in that practical sphere?” (“Without

Silliman's *Chinese Notebooks*, only reinforce the necessity of maintaining this dichotomy, since the polemic invariably dominates in its need for discursive clarity, completeness, and persuasiveness.

Veronica Forrest-Thomson's brief career in some ways parallels that of many of the Language poets. Their shared intellectual affiliations—Poststructuralism, the later Wittgenstein who went from the picture theory of language to “language games,” and excitement about the implications of linguistic constructivism for the practice of poetry—were publicly acknowledged and celebrated in Charles Bernstein's verse-essay “Artifice of Absorption.” The possibility of self-validating form and the pleasures of playful linguistic self-regard are strong motivating forces in her poetry, and make her highly sympathetic in principle and practice to the work of both Ashbery and Prynne. Like many of the Language poets and fellow Cambridge poets, she believes that poetic uses of language can transform reality: “When we get behind the surface of a poem we encounter not another kind of meaning nor a different non-poetic world, but another organization of the levels of language that produce meaning. Through the relation between these levels, language and the world may be changed, changed utterly” (*Poetic Artifice* 36). Her work is thus part of the contemporary optimism about poetry's power to transform the world, not by speaking to the world about current or perennial issues, but by reconfiguring language itself. Here, then, is a vision of a craft that, through a single-minded engagement with its own conditions of production, can change the very structure of reality. Yet by introducing resonances of Yeats' “Easter, 1916,” in which the phrase “changed, changed utterly” indicates Yeats' ambivalence towards violent revolutionary ambitions, Forrest-

Consequences Is No Politics” 306-307). Altieri is responding to McGann's highly appreciative account of Language Poetry in the essay “Contemporary Poetry, Alternative Routes.”

Thomson introduces an element of ironic disavowal into her utopian statement (Yeats 83). Her primary focus is on artifice rather than revolution: no critical text has used the term ‘artificiality’ with the freedom and approbation that Forrest-Thomson lavishes on it.¹³ As I will try to show in the section that follows, Forrest-Thomson’s description of the workings of poetic artifice might constitute a partial solution for some of the aporias of Language Poetry.

Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Difficulty, and Artifice

In some ways, Forrest-Thomson’s approach is far more rooted in the tradition of English-language poetry than the Language poets’. For her, restoring the centrality of poetic artifice is implicitly to recreate the seventeenth-century conditions dear to Modernists like Eliot and Empson (*Poetic Artifice* 96). In her mature thinking, she asserts that the starting point of the relationship between poem and reader is consensus rather than opposition: presuppositions about poetic form create a basic accord between poetic tradition, authorial mediation, and the reception of the text. Not only is a class-based analysis conspicuous by its absence—and in this Forrest-Thomson differs not only from the Language poets but also from the more vocal theorists of the Cambridge School—but the dialectic that is deployed is one of simultaneous accommodation and defiance. Though her account of artifice is sympathetic to difficulty, her own description of the trajectory of her poetic career locates its temporary point of culmination not in the refusal

¹³ The term would be more familiar to American readers through Marjorie Perloff’s *Radical Artifice*. Alison Mark has rightly pointed out that Perloff never mentions Veronica Forrest-Thomson in that book despite the fact that Forrest-Thomson almost single-handedly made artifice viable as a critical term in late-twentieth century poetics (*Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Language Poetry* 115). Perloff borrows the phrase “radical artifice” from Richard A. Lanham’s essay “The Electronic Word” (*Radical Artifice* 18).

of meaning and retreat into the “non-meaningful aspects of language” but in a freedom from “sterile self-absorption” that can enable the creation of “new artifices of eternity” (*Collected Poems and Translations* 264).¹⁴

From the very outset, Forrest-Thomson considers the difficulty of twentieth-century poetry to be an effect of poetic artifice:

[P]oetry has become more difficult—notoriously so—and these difficulties are due to the increasing complexities of poetic artifice. The poetry of our century particularly requires a theory of the devices of artifice, such as apparently non-sensical imagery, logical discontinuity, referential opacity, and unusual metrical and spatial organization, and an account of the relationships between various strata of artifice” (*Poetic Artifice* ix-x).

T.S. Eliot’s interpretation of difficulty as an effect of modernity is thus countered by a dehistoricized reading of difficulty as the product of the evolving logic of poetic artifice. Central to Forrest-Thomson’s project is the need to differentiate poetic language, which she considers fundamentally self-referential, from other—externally referential—uses of language, and thus negotiate the distinction between language and the world. “There would be no point,” she says,

in writing poetry unless poetry were different from everyday language, and any attempt to analyse poetry should cherish that difference and seek to remain within its bounds for as long as possible rather than ignore the difference in an unseemly rush from words to world. Good naturalization dwells on the non-meaningful levels of poetical language, such as phonetic and prosodic patterns and spatial organization, and tries to state their relation to other levels of organization rather than set them aside in an attempt to produce a statement about the world. (*Poetic Artifice* xi)

She therefore seeks to highlight the process of “artificial limitation/expansion,” which reverses the hierarchy that privileges reality over fiction and questions the givenness of

¹⁴ It is significant that in this almost final comment on the theme of artifice, she chooses to turn artifice, via Yeats, into a transitive process—“artifices *of*”—that has for its object the immortality of art, which is the displaced human desire to overcome death. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the subtext of Forrest-

extra-linguistic reference. Artificial limitation/expansion, or “internal limitation and expansion” is “what happens when the world of ordinary language is drawn into the poem’s technique so that those parts of that world implied by the meaning of words and phrases are limited by their function inside the poem but also expanded by the power released when levels other than meaning become important” (*Poetic Artifice* 27). The continuity between poetic language and ‘everyday language,’ Forrest-Thomson argues, requires a deliberate “discontinuity, a dislocation,” (27) as non-poetic discourses enter poetic discourse. It is poetic artifice that enables this disjunction. The project, in other words, is nascently Poststructuralist, and linguistic constructivism is already a distinct possibility in some varieties of twentieth-century poetry: “In some literary styles, notably, but not entirely, those developed in this century, the connection between verbal form and the extension of verbal meaning into the non-verbal world may be openly questioned. The implication that ‘reality’ is a product of linguistic rules may emerge” (*Poetic Artifice* 28).

So far, Forrest-Thomson remains within the ambit of Language-centred theory. Her concern about being able to evaluate the relative merits of the products of such theoretical premises, however, leads her to produce a typology of difficulty (which anticipates those of both Steiner and Wilkinson discussed in chapter 1) that requires poetry to self-regulate its own freedoms by acknowledging the primacy of rationality. The argument that she presents in “Rational Artifice: Some Remarks on the Poetry of William Empson” and in chapter 2 of *Poetic Artifice* are essentially the same. Taking the example of David Gascoyne’s “The Rite of Hysteria,” she claims that mere obscurity,

Thomson’s apparently formalist enterprise is an urgent desire to protect not just the autonomy of poetry, but of the human subject.

which involves no organization and density at the level of sound, metre, rhythm, image complexes, and other ‘artificial’ aspects of poetry, creates a form of “irrational” obscurity that ends up being merely unintelligible. Such difficulty is discontinuous enough, but is discontinuity that excludes artifice: “Gascoyne may ignore these requirements [of poetic artifice] and write as he pleases to stress his discontinuity, but the price [...] is complete unintelligibility and loss of any incentive for the reader to continue (*Poetic Artifice* 40).¹⁵

Concrete poetry is another example of bad irrational poetry: it discourages rationalization and analysis of poetic technique, and generates interpretations that have to stay within the realm of broad generalizations: “Concrete poetry is one extreme of irrational obscurity where we go beyond meaning and rationality altogether, so that it seems almost pointless to talk of obscurity. Once all pretense to meaning is abandoned, the artifacts themselves are not obscure—though why someone should have been bothered to produce them may be obscure” (*Poetic Artifice* 47). Forrest-Thomson is therefore certainly not interested in obscurity for its own sake, but only in those forms of obscurity that make other levels of language use available to the reader: “The opposite of extended meaning is not nonsense but a different kind of sense (organization of linguistic levels)” (*Poetic Artifice* 46).

As opposed to such ‘bad’ irrational obscurity, Forrest-Thomson offers two ‘good’ kinds of obscurity: “good irrational obscurity” and “rational obscurity.” The first, for which she cites Prynne’s “Of Sanguine Fire” as an example, successfully uses artifice to create what might be modes of rationality that elude systematic elucidation: such

¹⁵ Forrest-Thomson might appear dogmatic here in her intolerance for Gascoyne’s work or for Concrete Poetry, both of which she dismisses as insufficiently artificial. However, the methods she uses in identifying Gascoyne’s work as mediocre would have been useful in exposing literary frauds like the fictional Australian poet “Ern Malley,” whose pseudo-expressionist work is distinguished by the same lack of poetic artifice and the same resistance to close reading. See *Jacket* 17, the Ern Malley special issue of *Jacket Magazine*, for a detailed account of the hoax.

irrational obscurity “works industriously with meaning and other levels of artifice so that, while remaining extremely obscure, it gives the impression of attaining a deeper rationality” (*Poetic Artifice* 47). The limitations of Forrest-Thomson’s reading of “Of Sanguine Fire” have already been ably pointed out. So I will not dwell on the appropriateness of her example, particularly since her conclusions, even if not her analysis, seem reasonably adequate to the data at hand: “Irrational obscurity is a cover for a deeper and more profound rationality which, while discontinuous with the world of ordinary language, is continuous with a world which is an imagined alternative” (51). She does not exempt either case of irrational obscurity from deliberate intention or ‘wilfullness’ (*Poetic Artifice* 50), so that Prynne’s difficulty is less a “cover” than a precipitation of historical forces, as Wilkinson proposes. The notion of ontological difficulty is significantly absent from Forrest-Thomson’s schema.

Despite her admiration for Prynne, however, it is the “rational obscurity” of William Empson that she finds most appealing. Her example is Empson’s poem “Manchouli,” which initially appears to be speaking of a shared empirical reality, but towards the end withdraws into a form of coherence that depends on the poem’s own internal correspondences that are unrelated to its declared theme. Coherence and interpretation are thus not forbidden, but take place on the poem’s own terms, i.e., through artifice. This is an instance of what she calls “rational obscurity”:

Empson’s technique, which makes provision for the naturalising discourse of the critic, leads him out into the world and then fictionalises that external context in a movement of internal or artificial expansion and limitation. As such, it is infinitely more powerful than any type of irrational obscurity, for it can disarm the reader and swear him in as one of the poetic Mafia instead of just shooting him down or showing him the door. (*Poetic Artifice* 57)

Forrest-Thomson implies that the poet should ground the unfamiliarity of artifice in the

familiar, either in terms of form (in the case of the “disconnected image-complex”) or of content (“rational obscurity”). While easy ‘naturalisation’ or reduction to paraphrase must be resisted, the ‘game’ of poetic language as she imagines it clearly includes the discovery of meaning and design. Even though she is fully aware of the inclination of poetry towards difficulty, Forrest-Thomson is thus entirely open, even partial to, more subtle effects that introduce difficulty gradually, and combine familiarity with estrangement so that the readerly experience is one of seduction rather than of assault. In fact, at a particular point she refers to the tendency of some of her contemporaries (Andrew Crozier and J.H. Prynne, to be specific, though I am not certain that she is entirely right in this regard) towards ‘pure’ forms of unnaturalizable difficulty as “the obscure disaster” that has befallen poetic technique (*Poetic Artifice* 141). This is why, for instance, she can appreciate Sylvia Plath’s technical prowess without indulging in the biographical fallacy and without denying the power of Plath’s content; this is also why she finds it possible to distinguish between the semantic and non-semantic aspects of poetic language without having to establish a corresponding divide in the terrain of artifice.¹⁶ Her conception of artifice extends into the semantic realm, particularly when sections of reportage or innocuous commentary serve as decoys that unmask themselves as artifactual as soon as the overall design of the poem stands revealed.

The adoption of a somewhat rigid distinction between rationality and irrationality, together with a preference to side with what she understands as rationality, underlies her privileging of Empson’s rational obscurity. In fact, difficulty’s challenge to accepted ways of rationalizing the world was a preoccupation for her long before she wrote *Poetic Artifice*. In the 1971 essay “Irrationality and Artifice,” she sets forth the problem with admirable

¹⁶ For Forrest-Thomson’s remarks on Plath, see *Poetic Artifice* 159-63.

clarity of mind, even though the solution she offers at that point is tentative. To reject rationality entirely, she believes, is not only aesthetically unsatisfactory; it is in fact impossible:

There is very little hope that poetry, or any of the other arts, will be able to make itself independent of the system-forming and sense-ascribing properties of the human mind. Even if it were to be possible completely to baffle the assiduous investigators both present and future with an absolutely indecipherable verbal production, this production would itself be connected with the rules and conventions of verbal combinations innate in its producer and implicit in its historical situation. The ideal of irrationality itself is a cultural product. (“Irrationality and Artifice” 125)

At this point, she seems to critique the distinction between rationality and irrationality, and recognizes irrationality as a cultural artifact rather than an empirical fact. This recognition does not, however, lead her to assume that all forms of apparent irrationality have their own modes of rationality. As her analysis of Gascoyne and Concrete Poetry indicates, she seems to believe that irrationality that eludes all systematization is possible, even though it is achieved at the cost of negating the possibility of a dialogue with the reader. Just as she claims that there are non-meaningful levels of language—a claim that Bernstein will challenge in “Artifice of Absorption”—she also accepts the possibility that language-use can indeed be irrational. Her willingness to work with such stark dichotomies is responsible for the urgency of her work, and of her consistent need to take an unequivocal stance. By imagining real danger for both poetry (as a reduction to pure materiality) and for art (as a total immersion in the wilderness of unreason), she is able to create space for a non-moralistic but nevertheless ultimately ethically charged theory of poetic fair-play through artifice.

Her unwillingness to court extremes explains the vacillation of her poems between all-out experimentation with chopped-up words or intense disjunctions that

indicate a strong interest in ‘language games,’ and more ‘conventional’ poems that experiment with the personal themes and other recognizable formulations of content that continuously evade categorization. The ‘Wittgensteinian’ *Language-Games* (1971) obviously belongs to the first category. Though the tendency persists after that point, the possibilities of the ‘disconnected image complex’ and indeed the influence of J.H. Prynne¹⁷ make her later work frequently override the purely formal concerns. Her longest poem, and one of her last—“Cordelia, or ‘A Poem Should Not Mean, but Be’”—belongs to the latter category, and seems to indicate the direction in which her work might have developed. I include the following section from “Cordelia,” not only because of its appositeness to this dissertation, but also because it testifies to a consummate craftsmanship that is not frequently noticed even by sympathetic readers:

I am not Prince Thomas Aquinas F.H. Eliot
 I am not an attendant lord either.
 I am the king who lives.
 Spring surprised us, running through the market square
 And we stopped in Prynne’s rooms in a shower of pain
 And went on in the sunlight into the University Library
 And ate yogurt and talked for an hour. (*Collected Poems and Translations* 109)

This is certainly not a ‘simple’ poem, and the extensive references to Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and *The Waste Land* in fact point strongly to the Modernist history of difficult poetry as such. Yet far more subtle effects are at work. On the one hand, there seem to be a lot of autobiographical references of the “Lunch Poems” variety once the Eliotic references abate, and as more ‘authentic’ spaces and activities appear:

¹⁷ The lineation of “To R.Z. and M.W.” (*Collected Poems and Translations* 53) bears an uncanny resemblance to “As grazing the earth” and similarly arranged Prynne poems. Stone-Richards suggests, however, that Prynne borrows this layout from Hölderlin. So Forrest-Thomson too might be alluding to Hölderlin here, though she generally seems to incline towards French rather than German poetry, and (unlike Prynne) seems not to have had any special attachment to the Romantics. On the other hand, she seems to have had considerable admiration for Prynne, as her discussions of his work in *Poetic Artifice* indicate, and is quick to catch a reference to Shelley in Prynne’s “Of Sanguine Fire” (*Poetic Artifice* 48).

Prynne's rooms, the University Library, eating yogurt, talking. Uncertainties creep in even here, of course: "the shower of pain" replaces the more predictable "rain" with "pain"—a striking instance of the "crypt-word" (see chapter 1). While Alison Mark has remarked on the substitution, she has not pointed out how this surrealistic phrase might aid in an "internal expansion and limitation" in Forrest-Thomson's sense of the term. I will briefly point out this particular level of artifice that constitutes, I think, the most important breakthrough in this poem.

The 'external' movement of the word "Prince" reaches out to Eliot; internally, it creates a crisp monosyllable that is rhymed by "lives" a line later, and echoed by the 'in'-unit that reappears in "king" and "Spring." The word "pain" reinforces this pattern by reproducing the 'p' and 'n' sounds of "Prince." The clinching move is of course the brilliant and audacious reduction of Jeremy Prynne's last name into a homophone for "Prince": thus the retreat to Prynne's rooms is as much motivated by the bad *Waste Land* weather (external naturalisation, according to Forrest-Thomson's classification) as by the accumulated momentum of the sound pattern that at this point reveals itself as artifice. The reader, realizing the trick that has been played on her, must return in full speed in the reverse order: "Prynne's" to "pain" to "Spring" to "king" to "Prince." This would be an internal naturalization, though the humor of turning the stately Prynne into the procrastinating Prince Hamlet/Prufrock/Eliot might be considered a second-level external naturalisation. (Hopefully, all of it has been 'good.')¹⁸ The deception here is based primarily on the excessive authority of proper nouns: their apparent solidity and

¹⁸ There are other features of this passage that require extended commentary, of course. For instance, there is a fascinating arrangement of the letter 'o' that creates a sonic and visual pattern that can only be intentional, considering her own appreciation of the arrangement of 'o's in a passage from Eliot's *The Waste Land* in *Poetic Artifice* (133).

their reference to actual individuals ensure that biography can charge in and maintain the illusion of a ‘slice of life,’ a restrained and conflicted foray into confessionality.¹⁹ What this hides is of course an extreme degree of skill in transforming content into form.²⁰

The problem that Forrest-Thomson attempts to confront through poems such as this can be partially summed up in her own words. In the preface to *On the Periphery*, her posthumously-published collection, she says: “After the head-on collision with non-poetic languages in my previous work I was faced by a stylistic situation on the periphery of traditional poetry” (263). “Cordelia” addresses tradition from its utmost borders, with tradition not being questioned through philosophy (nascent Post-Structuralism, Wittgenstein) or through the language of science, but by the self-sufficiency of poetic language that demands intelligent attention without being limited by norms of intelligibility. Its presence can be apprehended, but the reason for its presence is less obvious—it is, in other words, an ornament: part of the poetic tradition, but only of the clandestine tradition of poetic craft. Forrest-Thomson’s last works, both theoretical and poetical, indicate that she had acquired the technical skill and conviction required to tackle language as simultaneously meaningless and meaningful. The temptation of an

¹⁹ An earlier poem—“It Doesn’t Matter about Mantrippe” (*Collected Poems* 47–48)—plays in a more explicit manner with proper names as it explores the relationship between the proper and the common. As the poem proceeds, the particularity implied in the names (apart from ‘Mantrippe,’ she introduces ‘George,’ ‘Newton,’ ‘Urusov,’ and ‘Battersea’) edges closer to generality. According to Jonathan Culler, the choice of the name ‘Mantrippe’ had very little to do with its actual referent: “I do think that she considered proper names just material for the poetry and was not imagining that anyone would try to ferret them out. For example, Mantrippe, in ‘It doesn’t matter about Mantrippe,’ was a student of mine, and for some reason I had uttered this phrase—perhaps I could reschedule a tutorial or something, but it wasn’t as though this had some special meaning for her—just language that would fit into the poem” (Email to the author, 18 April 2012). Culler adds that “of course, this doesn’t apply to names like Wittgenstein, Prynne, and Barthes” (Email to the author, 11 June 2012); many of the names in “It Doesn’t Matter” are also names that do, or ought to, matter.

²⁰ But of course I exaggerate: Forrest-Thomson’s comments in her preface to *On the Periphery* indicate that autobiography was as much on her mind as artifice (*Collected Poems* 264). And the references to Prynne earlier in “Cordelia” do not seem to make use of his somewhat evocative surname, though they do call attention to Prynne’s middle name (*Collected Poems* 106).

intransigent, pure difficulty based on the deification of form was always a temptation for her, but she intrepidly invites content back in due to her belief that form could ‘absorb’ everyday experience and language and subordinate them to the creative principle. In this, she displays a typical Cambridge tendency to take on content—which in poets like Prynne comes very close to being defined as ‘all that has ever been said or known,’ though she stands out by her dissociation from the late-Marxist lugubriousness that has afflicted most of the Cambridge-based poet-intellectuals. Thus she is somewhere in between Language and Cambridge, a fact that is amply proved by the fact that her work has been of considerable interest to Charles Bernstein as well as a host of younger British poets.

Bernstein and Artifice

It is not strictly true to say that Bernstein followed Forrest-Thomson into the artifice debate. The issue of artifice had been important for Bernstein at least from 1977—a year before Forrest-Thomson’s *Poetic Artifice* was published—since “Stray Straws and Straw Men” (1977) already speculates on the role of artifice. But when he takes the topic up in the mid-1980s for serious consideration, Forrest-Thomson’s book had become a much-admired work with a small but select following. Her terms like ‘naturalization’ and ‘image-complex’ had, in fact, acquired a certain currency among British poet-critics, and were perhaps more influential than the term ‘artifice,’ which continued—and continues—its low profile existence in critical diction. Bernstein has in fact been unique among Language poets for maintaining a strong interest in the meagre

but high-quality theoretical work produced by Cambridge poets: he is, for instance, aware of and has favorably cited J.H. Prynne's anti-structuralist "Stars, Tigers, and the Shape of Words."²¹ His exchange with the Cambridge School begins at least as early as his *Artifice of Absorption* (1987).²² He declares his essay to be an explicit dialogue with Forrest-Thomson, using her definition of artifice to introduce the concept, taking issue, however, with her valorization of the non-meaningful elements of poetry:

[...] It seems to me she is wrong to designate the nonlexical, or more accurately, extralexical strata of the poem as "nonsemantic"; I would say that such elements as line breaks, acoustic patterns, syntax, etc, *are* meaningful rather than, as she has it, that they *contribute* to the meaning of the poem. [...]
The semantic strata of a poem should not be understood as only those elements to which a relatively fixed connotative or denotative meaning can be ascribed, for this would restrict meaning to the exclusively recuperable elements of language—a restriction that if literally applied would make meaning impossible. After all, meaning occurs only in a context of conscious & unconscious, recuperable & unrecoverable, dynamics. (*A Poetics* 12-13)

The verse-form in which Bernstein writes the essay is, according to this logic, itself meaningful, though the meaning, unlike the meanings of words or context-specific sentences, is not determinate in any significant way: indeed, it would even be counterproductive if the meaning of the formal device had been immediately and unambiguously available.

From this point—itself contestable because it removes meaning from the realm of public consensus to private construction—however, Bernstein moves on to

²¹ See Bernstein's introduction to *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* 17.

²² Versions of the essay were presented as early as 1985 (*A Poetics* 229).

generalizations that make meaning omnipresent when he argues that

the designation of the visual, acoustic,
& syntactic elements of a poem as “meaningless”,
especially insofar as this is conceptualized as
positive or liberating—& this is a common habit
of much *current* critical discussion of syntactically
nonstandard poetry—is symptomatic of the desire to
evade responsibility for meaning’s total, &
totalizing reach; as if meaning was a husk
that could be shucked off or a burden that could be
bucked. Meaning is not a use value *as opposed to*
some other kind of value, but more like valuation
itself; & even to refuse value is a value & a sort
of exchange. Meaning is no where *bound*
to the orbit of purpose, intention, or utility. (13)

This totalitarian vision of meaning, where meaning is not made but extends indefinitely in all directions and in all things, parallels the argument for a ubiquitous politics that denies the possibility of any a-political act: “even to refuse value (which is analogous to meaning) is a value.” Putting aside the totalizing rhetoric—deliberately planted, no doubt, as a red herring, but also to suggest that all universalizations need not immediately segue into visions of Gulags and concentration camps—it is certainly possible to think that Bernstein’s description of meaning can bring ‘concrete’ and other genre-crossing work to reenter the space of meaning, and rescue them from their fringe status in most avant-garde coiffures. Appealing as this project is, however, it has to confront the problem of defining this meaning, and explaining why it appears to us in the aspect of meaninglessness.

The short-term solution for Bernstein, derived via Steve McCaffery, is a Gramscian capitalist conspiracy. The non-recuperable non-lexical meanings of poetry offer “modes of meaning given in language / but precluded by the hegemony of restricted / epistemological economies” and that they destroy “not meaning but various

utilitarian & / essentialist ideas about meaning” (*A Poetics* 18). This attempt to reveal the meanings that inhere in language invokes the magical speech of language—that ideal self-sufficiency in which being and saying converge in absolute identity. It is fundamentally based on the possibility of retaining the idea of meaning without the ‘essentialism’ that necessarily has to accompany a ‘utilitarian’ understanding of meaning: to be useful, meanings have to be fixed and standardized; otherwise the communicative economy will dissolve into local and contingent transactions that are devoid of universal transferability. The desire for meaning, however, is the desire also for community and sharing. Even the most radically unintelligible and apparently meaningless poem presents itself in the domain of meaning when it appears in the public sphere, advertising itself as an object that is willing to speak to an audience. Pure materiality, inasmuch as it exists and despite the fact that it can ground the work of art in a mode of being that is ontologically prior to meaning, is conceptually inaccessible even to the poet-thinker. To lapse into the ideal purity of matter is to withdraw from history and the polis. So for instance, Bernstein represents the exploration of thingness as ultimately an exploration of collective selfhood and humanity:

Language is the commonness in being, through which we see & make sense of & value. Its exploration is the exploration of the human common ground. The move from purely descriptive, outward directive, writing toward writing centered on its wordness, its physicality, its haecceity (thisness) is, in its impulse, an investigation of human self-sameness, of the place of our connection: in the world, in the word, in ourselves. (*Content’s Dream* 32)

(For the moment, we will bracket the question of whether there is such a thing as “purely descriptive” writing—these rather impossible generalizations are more or less inevitable in polemical writing.) Matter is a conduit to an unalienated collective selfhood rather than into a radical and inhuman otherness; it is not an end in itself for Bernstein. To

surrender oneself to the otherness of one's own mind—as in automatic writing—is to surrender completely to history, to the schemata of needs and processes that are negotiated through language into collective historical experience: no authentic and non-ideological version of the self can appear within the deceptive unmediatedness of automatism. To poetry that believes that it has a political task that it must actively pursue, both logocentrism and a necrophilic object-envy are both untenable choices. Meaning—though redescribed in various ways—inevitably has to find a place within the rhetoric of syntactic disruption and referential indirection. To state the problem in different terms, thought inevitably has to be reinstated in any poetic of 'materiality.'

These conflicts are palpable in the roughly contemporaneous poem "Autonomy Is Jeopardy," which appeared in *The Absent Father in "Dumbo"* (1990; later collected in *Republics of Reality*).

I hate artifice. All these
contraptions so many barriers
against what otherwise can't
be contested, so much seeming
sameness in a jello of
squirms. Poetry scares me. I
mean its virtual (or ventriloquized)
anonymity—no protection, no
bulwark to accompany its pervasive
purposivelessness, its accretive
acceleration into what may or
may not swell. Eyes demand
counting, the nowhere seen everywhere
behaved voicelessness everyone is clawing
to get a piece of. Shudder
all you want it won't
make it come any faster
last any longer: the pump
that cannot be dumped. (*Republics of Reality* 307)

As a demonstration of the possibilities of artifice, the poem is somewhat deficient. On

the one hand, it reuses Robert Grenier's 1971 declaration "I HATE SPEECH." Yet the tone is diametrically opposed to Grenier's vehement conviction. Bernstein is being ironic here. The poem is a very tentative excursion into the terrain marked out by such virtuoso performances as Marianne Moore's "Poetry," which also begins with a similar expression of self-repugnance: "I, too, dislike it" (Moore 36). There are attempts at local effects, but no real conversation is set up between form and content (this does happen in a very exciting way in Forrest-Thomson's "Cordelia," as I have shown) so that they stay separate and inconsequential. Part of the reason for the failure of this poem is its conventional interpretation of what thought means in poetry, but part of it is also due to a somewhat mechanical application of artifice accompanied by a paradoxical anxiety to ensure that an argument has been conveyed. This is not true of all poems by Bernstein, of course, but serves to demonstrate an issue that might be decisive for the long-term relevance of Language Poetry.

The poem experiments throughout with consonance in contiguous or near-contiguous word-groups: "pervasive / purposivelessness" (echoed by "voicelessness," which refers back to the voiceless sibilant /s/ that recurs in all these words); "accretive acceleration," "nowhere [...] everywhere [...] everyone" "Shudder [...] faster [...] longer" and of course the final and obtrusive pair: "pump" and "dump." Yet these do not really talk to each other to create a parallel design; the emphasis seems to be constantly on the 'naturalisable' aspects of the poem. The attempted foregrounding of artifice becomes partially successful with the "pump / that cannot be dumped," which obviously derives its relevance from the visual and sonic doublings in the words "pump" and "dump." Yet this description of poetic intransigence does not suffice as an affirmation of artifice,

which in fact seems to offer a weak and disorganized resistance to the argument. The striking inertness of the artifice in “Autonomy Is Jeopardy” is partly a result of the general Language-Poetry belief that poetry has to be backed up by theory or back up theory: it is rarely allowed to test out its own ability to perform modes of thinking native to poetic language and its peculiar energies. For this possibility to be explored, it is necessary that poetry be marked out as discontinuous from other forms of language use, and this possibility, as Language poets must realize, jeopardizes the political efficacy of linguistic acts. Yet Language poets are of course aware, at least in theory, of the possibility of a distinctly ‘poetic’ form of thinking.

What both Forrest-Thomson and Language poets including Bernstein have in common, however, is an awareness of the intellectual stakes of poetic difficulty. The moment poetry flouts or alters the notionally consensual forms of public language, the relationship between poetry and reason or *logos* is called into question. Both parties intuit the necessity of protecting the disordered and resistant poem from being relegated to the attics of public discourse, to rave uninterruptedly there unless it can find a way to burn down the entire edifice of reason—but in that case the arsonist will have to burn too, as the Victorian parable reminds us. Forrest-Thomson’s worries about irrationality, both good and bad, are therefore motivated by this loss of public relevance. Artifice offers an armature of rationality that can extend poetry’s deviant performances into other language-games that are concerned with explaining and ordering the world for public navigation. Thus it is necessary for poetry, particularly for the difficult and apparently irrational or insufficiently rational poem, to establish the rationality of its irrationality, as Forrest-Thomson tries to do in her reading of Prynne’s “Of Sanguine Fire.” Yet of course this

cannot in any way become a capitulation to the laws thought systematized in philosophy or science; it cannot even be a representation of the processes of the mind: something far more complex and subtle is required: “I should not like to suggest that the process of intellectual activity in a poem is *virtual* thinking merely; it is thought itself but divorced, if one may put it thus, from the application of thought to anything other than the words by which concepts are defined. By this fact it becomes a criticism of the systems of concepts that are its objects of knowledge” (“Irrationality and Artifice” 131-32).²³ While this emphasis on the word rather than the concept is simplistic and ultimately untenable, as Forrest-Thomson herself realized in the relatively moderate claims she makes in her essay on Empson and in *Poetic Artifice*, it nonetheless raises the problem of how such poetic thinking might in fact be distinguished from thought in general. As I have pointed out, for her, the solution is poetic artifice: which simulates the form of rationality without producing the typical outcomes of rational procedures.

The question therefore is not of enacting or performing thought through the poem—the meditative poem in the manner of Wordsworth, for instance. The Cartesian linkage of self-consciousness and existence, however, makes poetic self-consciousness a possible foundation for poetry’s self-legitimation. This partially accounts for the phenomenon of extreme self-reflexivity that we find accompanying much difficult poetry, whose existence has to be constantly explained. The moment from *Kazuo Dreamboats* that I allude to in chapter 3, in which the poem ironically offers points for guessing the links between its arguments, and Ashbery’s extended meditations on the act of writing the poem in “The Skaters” are typical in this respect: sometimes their principal task is to

²³ She comes very close to Adorno’s argument in *Aesthetic Theory* that “[t]echnique is the defineable figure of the enigma of works of art. It is rational but non-conceptual, permitting judgment in the area of the non-

indicate the poem's ability to think, and therefore its self-consciousness and right to exist.²⁴ The same can be said of much of 'difficult' poetry, which holds out, amongst its aberrant language-complexes, simple avowals of Cartesian rationality. This is why Pound's declaration towards the end of *The Cantos*—"I cannot make it cohere"—can paradoxically produce an aura of design that turns the incoherence into its opposite: this is *il miglior fabbro*'s last-ditch attempt at synthesis, and not an entirely unsuccessful one.

The *cogito* model is thus not without its place in poetic thought, but it by no means exhausts the possibilities of the concept. When the Canadian poet Steve McCaffery, who has been associated with Language Poetry, was asked to comment on the trend of the academic poet, he turns the issue towards poetic thinking, explicitly referring to the work of Martin Heidegger:

The issue isn't poetic theory versus praxis (poetics versus poematics) but how do we and how can we engage poetic thinking. There's also the related question of how thinking can be utilized outside of orthodoxy. Heidegger inaugurates this matter of poetic thinking in his later works, which indicate his shift in interest from ontology to poetry and language. He turns, however, to a rather limited range of Germanic resources: Hölderlin, Trakl, Celan (the latter non-German but writing in German). I believe Heidegger opens up a vast potential terrain of poetic relevance that can be partially flagged by a couple of questions: how does poetry think and what is unique to the kind of thinking? ("Trans-Avant-Garde: An Interview with Steve McCaffery")

The idea of 'poetic thinking' is, in the work of Heidegger, closely linked to the notion of *techné*. For the Greeks—Heidegger's constant point of philosophical and etymological reference—*techné* is *episteme poietike*, or "a knowledge of producing" (Sinclair 49).

Heidegger translates Plato's definition of *poiesis* thus: "Every occasion for whatever passes

judgmental" (304).

²⁴ Compare Norton's comments: "Poetic thinking, for Ashbery, is reflection: the subject, as thinking being, reflects on his own subjectivity, and in doing so reflects that subjectivity—which is no more fixed or consistent than thought itself" (Norton 282). While this is quite right, Ashbery is of course equally interested in thinking through form, as the deliberate formalism of some of his work suggests.

beyond the non-present and goes forward into presencing is *poiesis*, bringing forth” (“The Question Concerning Technology” 317). (This also reminds us that very early in the history of Anglophone poetics, the etymology of poetry had been traced back to the notion of ‘making’ or ‘producing’ in sharp distinction to merely ‘re-producing’ or ‘re-presenting.’²⁵) In his lecture “Discourse on Thinking,” Heidegger recommends the use of a non-teleological mode of thinking—which he calls ‘meditative thinking’—as an antidote to the degradation of *techne* from its original Greek meaning as *poiesis* to the contemporary sense of an instrumentalized ‘technology.’²⁶ The rescue of a non-metaphysical form of making—in which the subject-object division is no longer operative—involves a reconfiguration of thinking itself, or to use McCaffery’s term, a thinking “outside of orthodoxy.” The bridge between mere artifact—in the sense in which it appeared demeaning to Bernstein earlier in this chapter—and art as a socially constructive and even

²⁵ I have in mind Philip Sidney’s “The Defense of Poesy” in which he explores the etymology of the word “poetry”:

But now let us see how the Greeks named it and how they deemed of it. The Greeks called him ποιητήν which name hath, as the most excellent, gone through other languages. It cometh of this word ποιεῖν, which is “to make”; wherein I know not whether by luck or wisdom we Englishmen have met with the Greeks in calling him a maker. [...] There is no art delivered unto mankind that hath not the works of nature for his principal object, without which they could not consist, and on which they so depend as they become actors and players, as it were, of what nature will have set forth. [...]

Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow, in effect, into another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature, as the heroes, demi-gods, cyclops, chimeras, furies, and such like; so as he goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging within the zodiac of his own wit. Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too-much-loved earth more lovely; her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden. (Sidney 6-7)

For Heidegger, however, the ‘making’ of nature is superior to poetic making: see page 317 of “The Question Concerning Technology.”

²⁶ In fact, instrumentality is one of the possibilities that inhere in *poiesis* or “bringing forth,” within whose domain

belong ends and means as well as instrumentality. Instrumentality is considered to be the fundamental characteristic of technology. If we enquire step by step into what technology, represented as means, actually is, then we shall arrive at revealing. The possibility of all productive manufacturing lies in revealing.

constitutive practice, manifests itself in Heidegger's thought as the relationship between *techne*, poetry (*Dichtung*), and thinking. Both 'meditative thinking'—his term for his own activity as a post-metaphysical philosopher—and 'poetic making' seek to arrive at a non-descriptive and non-appropriative "unconcealment" of Being ("Discourse on 'Thinking'" 124). More importantly, perhaps, thinking is for Heidegger a submission to "the matter of thinking,"²⁷ which is *aletheia*, defined not as truth but as that which "grants the possibility of truth" ("The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking" 449; 446). To approach such an unconcealment, a non-metaphysical mode of thinking is required—one that transcends scientific rationality: "Perhaps there is a thinking outside of the distinction of the rational and the irrational, more sober-minded than scientific technology, without effect, yet having its own necessity" ("The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking" 449).

The care with which major poets like Paul Celan and George Oppen, as also J.H. Prynne and Lyn Hejinian, have read Heidegger indicates that his thinking on language and poetry and existence have contributed to poets' understanding of assumptions implicit in poetry and its making. Instead of exploring direct lines of influence and dialogue, however, I will take up a concept that is important for Heidegger, even though they are by no means entirely original to him: his idea of 'errancy,' which finds interesting echoes in the work of both Language poets and Cambridge poets. The most extended treatment of the notion of errancy (*die Irre*) can be found in the 1930 lecture "On the

Technology is therefore no mere means. Technology is a way of revealing. ("The Question Concerning Technology" 318)

²⁷ In an earlier version of this essay "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," titled "What Is Called, What Is Called for, Thinking?" the terminal point of his meditations is still the determination of thinking by what the thinking is about: "But in the meantime we have learned to see that the essential nature of thinking is determined by what there is to be thought about: the presence of what is present, the Being of beings" (*Philosophical and Political Writings* 86).

Essence of Truth,” which, despite its residual anthropocentrism, is a powerful statement of the problem of error. Erring is understood both as wandering and as falling, and as such presents a strikingly proleptic defence of Heidegger’s own imminent fall through his collaboration with Hitler’s regime. Erring is a moment of untruth, in that it is man’s turning away from the mystery of his own true nature in order to access that which is readily available.²⁸ Yet like earlier thinkers on error, including Kant and Schiller,²⁹ Heidegger too considers error a measure of human freedom and as such intrinsic to human experience rather than an aberration or straying:

Man errs. Man does not merely stray into errancy. He is always astray in errancy, because as ek-sistent he in-sists [i.e., being concerned with the question of his own Being, man mistakenly seeks his Being in particular beings] and so already is caught in errancy. The errancy through which man strays is not something which, as it were, extends alongside man like a ditch into which he occasionally stumbles; rather, errancy belongs to the inner constitution of the Da-sein into which historical man is admitted. Errancy is the free space of that turning in which insistent ek-sistence adroitly forgets and mistakes itself constantly anew. (*Basic Writings* 133; parenthesis added)

Yet this is only one moment of the dialectic: errancy is an index of concealment, but it is also an inducement to resist wandering since it calls attention to the mystery that provokes errancy: “By leading him astray, errancy dominates man through and through. But, as leading astray, errancy at the same time contributes to a possibility that man is capable of drawing up from his ek-sistence—the possibility that, by experiencing errancy itself and by not mistaking the mystery of Da-sein, he *not* let himself be led astray” (*Basic Writings* 134). So errancy as a condition, and errors as particular instantiations of it, are part of the structure of both truth and freedom: it creates the openness—the freedom of

²⁸ “Man’s flight from the mystery toward what is readily available, onward from one current thing to the next, passing the mystery by—this is *erring*” (*Basic Writings* 133).

²⁹ For an overview of Heidegger’s position on error in relation to German Idealism and Romanticism, see Stephen Watson, especially pp. 50-52.

movement—within which questioning and investigation can happen from a stance of ignorance rather than knowledge. Errancy is, in this sense, an inevitable prelude to the ontological question.

The Language poets were among the first to take serious note of post-Heideggerian thinking as it presented itself in the work of the French post-structuralists, and Steve McCaffery is one of the most intelligent and expert manipulators of French ‘theory’ among his peers. In an early essay, he describes what he and his colleagues were trying to accomplish as “the poeticization of philosophy,” which he tentatively defines as “the thorough fragmentation of the Philosophic Space, which would then consist of a kind of unordered order, a pluralization (into something akin to Klein’s “partial objects”) of the notion of ‘Truth’” (*North of Intention* 114; he describes this process elsewhere as “pataphysics”, borrowing Alfred Jarry’s term.) While philosophy seeks to establish an imperium of singular truth, literature embodies difference as “a specific, outlawed reagent situated deep inside the philosophical adventure as Philosophy’s radical Other” (*North of Intention* 114).³⁰ Yet the approach is often oblique and contrarian: if philosophy is in search of incontrovertible truth, then one of McCaffery’s paradoxical means to corrected modes of thinking is error, as I shall presently demonstrate.

The tendency amongst Language poets to use error as an aesthetic and political device has received book-length attention in *Reading Error: The Lyric and Contemporary Poetry* by Nerys Williams. Williams addresses in this book Charles Bernstein’s explicit formulation of an aesthetic of error as humor, Michael Palmer’s use of error as a means

³⁰ But this is not to say that philosophy has been abandoned in favor of a ‘pure’ literature that is an antidote to philosophy. When asked by *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* to list “five non-poetry books that they had read in the last few years that have had a significant influence on their thinking and writing” for its 1979 issue,

of evading a totalizing subjectivity, and Hejinian's use of error to construct an anti-authoritarian and speculative discourse. The term 'error' is considered in its etymological density, so that full attention is given to the ways in which these poets construct an aesthetic and ethic of deviance, wandering, mistakes, and evasion.³¹ I am content, therefore, to address the work of Steve McCaffery, who is not mentioned in *Reading Error* but whose work is often explicitly governed by a philosophically-inflected errancy.

In the essay "Zarathustran 'Pataphysics'" written around the mid-1990s and collected in *Prior to Meaning*, McCaffery sets up a dialectic between truth and error. According to McCaffery, the essay "enacts, as well as speaks about, the inclination of the clinamen when the latter manifests within writing as a typographic 'error'" (*Prior to Meaning* 15). The concept of the 'clinamen' is probably the most generative formulation of error before the positing of random gene mutations as the basis of the evolution of species. The deviance in the case of McCaffery's essay, however, is only minimally challenging. It is printed in double columns, with the left hand column being a typoridden version of the correct text of the right hand column. The number of typos in the left column explodes after the word 'clinamen' is introduced, directly supporting the argument that at the level of writing, the liberating randomness of atomic motion is enacted by the tendency of letters to 'swerve' from their appointed places. As an aesthetic principle it is somewhat unoriginal, with the form echoing the sense in the time-honored tradition of Pope. The resistance to the norms of spelling—whose normativity is dependent on social fiat rather than an internal necessity of language—does not, unlike the collisions of Epicurean atoms, create a multifarious universe in the essay. Yet the

McCaffery responded by naming Derrida, Jameson, Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, and Georges Bataille (Reinfeld 40-41).

parallel existence of a ‘correct’ and an ‘incorrect’ version does foreground the possibility of the materiality of textual production constituting an individuating force. The error-ridden version seems in its deliberate acceptance of error, to veer towards poetic speech.

McCaffery uses error with greater ingenuity in “Preface: A Metapoetic” that opens the volume titled *Ghost Poems*:

Because I like the pronoun “we” I like to put the verb “to put” between
the first person pronoun “I” and the verb “to like” with the definite article “the”
placed before the word “poem.”
Now we can correct some of the poem’s mistakes.
even though it rhymes sometimes.

The reference to Fra Angelico is incorrect
as is the spelling of “Tennison.”

Three and a half inches by seven miles
is its correct measurement.

It has thirteen not fifteen verbs
and seventy-six not eleven
definite articles.
There are no gerunds

and only three proper names
if mine is put in brackets. (*Slightly Left of Thinking* 38)

The ‘metapoetic’ is the process of correcting the mistakes of the imaginary poem: the errors are of taxonomy and nomenclature (not a sonnet), of factual accuracy, problems of spelling, measurement, and numerical errors. Considering that the rest of *Ghost Poems* carries a series of mock-serious prose ‘responses’ to imagined or ‘ghostly’ poems, the meta-poetic also reflects the truth-discourses that have been the traditional adversaries of Plato. What we see here is not merely a celebration of error in itself but an attempt to stage a dialogue between error and truth. In fact, within the space of the poem, this distinction is called into question by its strategy of withholding the error-ridden original,

³¹ Interestingly, the book teems with typographical errors.

so that only the corrections are available to the reader. The reader, who is deprived of the spectral yet apparently anterior text to which the poem offers corrections, is encouraged to harbor a perverse desire for the absent ‘wrong’ text and even to prefer it in advance to the pointedly bland and pedantic corrections. The particular is implied in its absence, which is diverted into partial presence through vague attributions of error.

This is a good point to take up McCaffery’s dialogue with J.H. Prynne, since it is conducted along the same charged grid of dialecticized truth. Apparently in reply to a letter from McCaffery accompanying a consignment of literary output of the Language group, Prynne wrote in 1989 a cordial but devastating letter critiquing the theoretical assumptions of the Language poets. (The letter was subsequently published separately as “A Letter to Steve McCaffery.”) Prynne fully accepts the insight that language is heavily implicated in engendering and sustaining social, political, economic, and moral tendencies. However, he is far more skeptical about the possibility of ‘freeing’ language from these structures through performances of linguistic freedom:

[I]n the political question of reference to a world in which social action is represented linguistically and its consequences marked out by economic function and personal access to social goods (justice, freedom, brown bread), the ludic syntax of a language system is mapped on to determinations and coercions which by invasion cast their weights and shadows parasitically into the playing fields. I do not believe that “freedom” from this aspect of the social order is more than illusory. (40)

The playing fields of linguistic experimentation are themselves also the workplaces of ideology, so that the experiment has to begin, in Prynne’s account, with a full awareness of its own contamination. While most Language poets concede that freeing language from referentiality is not possible, they rarely abandon the possibility of an unalienated and authentic language. As Silliman says, “It is a [...] crucial lesson [...] to learn how to

experience language directly, to tune one's senses to it, than to use it as a mere means to an end... [which] is, in bourgeois life, common to all things, even the way we 'use' our friends... But language, so that it is experienced directly, moves beyond any such exercise in despair, an unalienated language" (*The Age of Huts* 173). There is very little here of that sense of the fallenness (and at this point we could say errancy) of language, including poetic language, that characterizes Prynne's later work and complicates the rescue that Silliman envisions. (I have already discussed Prynne's sense of a linguistically mediated and therefore universal complicity in the previous chapter.)

After a silence of ten years, McCaffery wrote a verse reply to Prynne. I quote it in full because it remains uncollected:

A Belated Reply to H.J. Prynne

summer makes a silence out of spring

—Vita Sackville-West

Edible as Easter, is
 we both returned
 muted, pronominal at best varnished
 into syntax. In your case
 the buttered toast too late for God
 too early for Being

a philosophical pantomime advancing an—

Dear Jeremy,
 the room's still open
 Cambridge IS a tablecloth
 I never replied to
 you ARE the city
 IS the library and correspondence
 inaugurates between

a toothbrush &
 that tablecloth

a cross the we But if I put

"gratefully" beside "three doors"

how does the Snow advance? (*Gig* 6; page 14)

The epigraph is incorrectly quoted from Sackville-West's long poem *The Land*; the actual line is "summer makes a silence *after* spring, / As who with age a liberal youth should chide" (Sackville-West 74; italics mine). The wrong quotation, accompanied by the incorrect name "H.J. Prynne," suggests that the poem deliberately courts inaccuracy even as it acknowledges the 'chiding' that McCaffery has received from Prynne. (This is not true, I think, in Ashbery's errors regarding convex mirrors.) Yet the poem has its own agenda that is quite apart from local skirmishes between philosophical bards:

we both returned
muted, pronominal at best varnished
into syntax.

Individuals have returned to language, and will be silenced, paradoxically, by syntax—which, in a doubling of paradox, is fragmented through the poem, as if in an attempt to give voice to the main players. I will not undertake a lengthy analysis of the poem here, nor claim to present a 'naturalized' reading of the text. What interests me is McCaffery's introduction of error into a high-power theoretical discourse within which right and wrong have their very conventional roles to play. McCaffery's botching of the word for that typically English form of entertainment—the 'pantomime'—is characteristic of the poetics of error that he proposes through an invocation of figures like Nietzsche, Jarry, Lucretius, and Bruno in the essay "Zarathustran 'Pataphysics." While this essay's initial appearance predates the poem by five years (versions of the essay were presented in conferences in 1994 and 1995, and another version was published in *Open Letter* in 1997), "A Belated Reply to H.J. Prynne" enacts McCaffery's later theoretical preoccupation with typographical error. For McCaffery, these errors represent the possibility of a materialist

poetics:

An emergent poetics will appreciate the word as *simultaneously* a complex expression of a single letter and a potentially unstable heterogeneity. Words, phrases, and letters will not form the *concillium* of a trace structure but “happen” as graphozoic contaminants. Envisioned will be a materialist poetics formed around the mobility of the single grapheme in partly—or entirely—aleatoric configurations. It will be a poetics that deliberately introduces error into linguistic systems of constraint to initiate the interplay of chance and necessity. (*Prior to Meaning* 25-26; column 2)

The rhetoric here is obviously indebted to the Deleuze-Guattari franchise, just as his earlier theoretical language drew heavily on Marxist terminology.³² The aleatoriness of typographical error deliberately introduced into poetry need not, however, result merely in the “interplay of chance and necessity” that will prefigure an anarchic utopia. Error—particularly in McCaffery’s double-columned performance in his ‘Pataphysics essay—depends to a great extent on the ‘correct’ or ‘corrected’ version of the text that McCaffery takes care to offer alongside his ‘pataphysical text full of typographical ‘clinamens.’ “A Belated Reply,” on the other hand, does not have an error-free text alongside it, and might, at first sight, appear to be less complex and divided in its allegiance to truth-telling than the academic essay. But if the errors in the poem are a declaration of culpability—a kind of performative “mea culpa”—it can only be ironic at best, considering his positive description of error throughout this essay and the very ironic attitude towards factual correctness evident in *Ghost Poems*. As a celebration of error as opposed to Prynne’s putative insistence on correctness of analysis in his letter to McCaffery, however, the poem itself makes the mistake of conflating typographical error as a poetic device (in the interests of a rhizomatic poetry) with the conceptual errors of which Prynne accuses him.

³² In an online interview, McCaffery has discusses his interest in a Marxist account of language, particularly that of Nicolai Marr. See McCaffery and Ryan Cox.

The adoption of error as technique suspends the distinction between right and wrong.

McCaffery's dealings with the concept of error is a good instance of the metaphysical complexities that postmodern poetics have to confront, particularly if such poetics incorporate ethical concerns. The socio-economic-linguistic analyses offered by both Language poets and Cambridge poets usually don't use the language of uncertainty or indeterminacy, or even self-deflating irony (Denise Riley's critical prose is a highly honorable exception). The tone of moral conviction is pervasive in political poetics, and the distinction between right and wrong is a live and urgent one in discussions of style and its implications. There is, in other words, a significant degree of investment in 'truth' discourses and matters of moral rectitude that have traditionally fascinated metaphysics. The escape from metaphysics via error is therefore an extremely hard trick to perform when one is committed to 'true' theoretical descriptions of the conditions that demand and/or enable poetic experimentation. Within a logical and moral framework that privileges accuracy and truthfulness—and even the most extreme postmodern philosophy has to continue functioning within this framework if it wants to be called philosophy—error can only be an oblique approach to that which is right or true. In fact, it is the idea of a happy mistake that drives the philosophically-minded poet to continue pursuing error. But to be authentic, the error has to be unintentional, and not deliberately introduced into the poem as in McCaffery's case, since this would lead to error not so much performing its 'pataphysical possibilities as indicating the possibility of 'pataphysics. Simulated error is not, strictly speaking, error at all since the author's stranglehold on the text and its meanings is never relaxed.

To a certain extent, such tendencies indicate the theoretical poet's attempt to

escape theory and its regime of truth. The tyranny of rectitude, moral and otherwise, is a form of heteronomy and coerced conformity compared to which error might in fact seem desirable; error might even be the precondition for authentic modes of truthfulness. This is why the Cambridge poet Keston Sutherland can lend support to the Language poets' general insight from the other side of the Atlantic:

The idea of freedom from error now sounds like a slogan either for religion or for totalitarianism; instead we have come to value its contrary, *freedom of error*, more and more unequivocally. It is a prerogative of the continuing Romantic imagination, as described by Friedrich Schlegel in reaction to the prevailing analytical and systematic thought of Kant, that we can assert the value of being *almost* right, of having *not* been accurate or comprehensive, of having fallen short, and more generally of being free to celebrate the effects of error in thinking and in language. ("The Trade in Bathos")

Sutherland is prominent among the young group of Cambridge poet-scholars who have been greatly inspired by the work of J.H. Prynne. I will with unpardonable carelessness pass over his very promising poetry—this being a mostly theoretical chapter, for better or worse—and consider his essay titled "Wrong Poetry." The essay's central preoccupation is line 33 from Wordsworth's "The Thorn," which was first published in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*. The line reads "'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide" and appears at the end of the following stanza:

High on a mountain's highest ridge,
Where oft the stormy winter gale
Cuts like a scythe, while through the clouds
It sweeps from vale to vale;
Not five yards from the mountain-path,
This thorn you on your left espy;
And to the left, three yards beyond,
You see a little muddy pond
Of water, never dry;
I've measured it from side to side:
'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide. (*Lyrical Ballads* 118-19)

The essay explores how this line, which is "among the most notorious single lines in all of

Wordsworth's poetry" (Sutherland 770), and considered "wrong" enough by readers and critics to persuade Wordsworth to change it into something more 'poetic' in later versions, is in fact "the best moment" in the poem (Sutherland 773).

Sutherland sees in the "wrongness" of the line evidence of revolutionary intransigence: the literalism of the offending lines is a form of resistance that no longer directly refers to its particular social context—French republicanism—but ends up being a generalized form of resistance:

A more abstract intransigence sounds under the line, an attitude and pressure of conviction dislocated from its social context and its materials of argument, an excitement too powerful to disown that is persisted in with almost nonsensical tenacity. The line is a powerfully unfamiliar and wrong line because it does this without offering the slightest explicit evidence that it is doing it: it cannot be smilingly catalogued as 'Republican intransigence', and yet there that intransigence is, negatively flourished, brazenly non-identical. (Sutherland 776)

McCaffery's poem had merely hinted at a felicitous wrongness that can swerve from the fixed orbitals of rationality; Sutherland's "wrongness" offers a full-fledged defense of poetic inappropriateness that is, however, not as interested in technique as it is in the revolutionary implications of deviation. Sutherland's notion of "wrongness" also differs from McCaffery's version in that McCaffery's typographical errors are immediately recognizable as such; Sutherland's category, on the other hand, remains ill-defined. He offers no example of wrongness apart from Wordsworth's couplet, and both its wrongness for nineteenth-century audiences and its rightness for Sutherland are historically determined rather than empirically verifiable. He in fact offers this ineffable quality of his new aesthetic category as its chief virtue. In the penultimate paragraph of the essay, he argues that wrongness is:

a trial of doubt that confounds identification, the loss of confidence in being right, an unease about what will qualify or matter, a compulsion to sublate first

reactions under the pressure of sheer insistence on whatever most emphatically escapes them, and a passionate resistance of whatever thought seems most nearly conclusively acceptable or is in any measure already familiar and satisfying. Unlike 'autonomous art' or 'committed art', it is a category with no fixable content. The criterion for belonging to it is to escape it. It is not the name or conceptual gloss imposed on a corpus of works, but an experience seeking out its object, an experience that is possible only on condition that its object be the wrong object. (779)

Echoes of Steiner's "ontological difficulty" and Wilkinson's "Enigmatic poem" are palpable here. While Sutherland's commitment to 'pataphysics is not as evident as McCaffery's, both their categories attempt to evade metaphysical generalizations and insist on a counter-metaphysics grounded in the deviance of the resisting particular.

Sutherland's principle of wrongness is also useful in that it is explicitly linked to difficult poetry through Adorno. Difficult art is precisely that which creates a powerful sense of wrongness, he asserts (767). Sutherland's passionate defense of a line of Wordsworth's poem, his recognition of the need to like that particular line, is part of his awareness of the fundamental wrongness of the difficult poetry that he himself practices. Again and again we find poetics trying to access the zone of numinous particularity that the poem itself seems to achieve almost by accident: Wordsworth's 'bad' line was not intentionally bad, and was not meant to challenge philistine audiences. Though Sutherland does not mention this, the poem in which the line appears is thematically about errancy. "The Thorn" speaks of a young woman named Martha Ray who 'erred,' or was seduced by a man who would later abandon her while she was unmarried and carrying his child. She is wronged and at the same time errant, insane, and also probably legally in the wrong, for the narrator of the poem suggests that she might, in her madness, have killed her illegitimate child. The narrator's preoccupation with facts marks him out as an amateur scientist, for he carries a telescope and, notoriously, goes along and

measures the sinister infant-sized pond. The same attention to factual rightness that generates McCaffery's "Preamble" and its sceptical dramatization of discourses of correctness is active here, even though it is relatively less obtrusive. It is as if just at the moment when the narrator is particularly anxious to come across as factual, the poem falls into error, which then must be defended and loved as the poem's most precious discovery.

Sutherland's hope that poetry might arrive at non-systematisable and wrong but efficacious forms of linguistic arrangement, however, suppresses the problem of moral rightness that covertly informs aesthetic 'correctness.' When experimental poetry seeks to explore exactly those domains of being that have not been colonized by social convention, it risks being wrong in ways that might not be ultimately right. The political consequences of Heidegger's radical philosophy and Pound's radical poetry are cases of fairly authentic and inadvertent wrongness; Postmodern poetry's attempt to be deliberately wrong, on the other hand, is a straying that understands that this alone might be the freedom that can remain harmless. Yet the pattern predicted by Heidegger's argument surfaces in each case: error must be put to use, given meaning, valorized as the gateway to rightness. The fundamentally errant, marginal status of difficult poetry necessarily pushes its champions to this moment of contradiction.

Poetic Thinking

The principle of error-as-technique only partially addresses the problem raised by Forrest-Thomson. To rephrase her question somewhat: how is the rejection of immediate intelligibility and the norms of everyday language to be thought of as not

merely transgression, resistance and play, but also as constructive and ultimately rational? In this final movement of my argument, I will revisit the possibility of a distinctive 'poetic thinking.' While Forrest-Thomson's solution is artifice, the term is limited primarily by its emphasis on authorial design. It cannot account for the possibility of thought that might be organized not by the intention of the author or by a disembodied rationality but by the materiality of the medium, which might be closest to a non-rational mode of being. I will turn now to the thinking of Simon Jarvis and Prynne to consider the modes of thought that might be enabled when normal modes of representation and expression are wholly or partly disabled. But first, we must consider the mimetic model of the relationship between thought and art, where difficulty in art develops as a result of imitating mental operations and states of mind.

Bernstein's "Thought's Measure" is a meandering early essay that attempts to tackle the relationship between thought and its relation to language. The essay begins with a basic strategy of Language Poetry, in which attentiveness to language is presented as already including attentiveness to thought. After a couple of preliminary nods to Wittgenstein and Walter Benjamin, Bernstein proceeds to obviate the need to discuss thinking as a separate category. Instead, thinking becomes a source of analogies for literary techniques:

In talking about language and thinking I want to establish the *material*, the stuff, of writing, in order, in turn, to base a discussion of writing on its medium rather than on preconceived literary ideas of subject matter and form. And I want to propose 'thinking' as a concept that can help to materially ground that discussion. 'Thinking' as the conceptual basis of literary production suggests the possibilities for leaps, jumps, fissures, repetition, bridges, schisms, colloquialisms, trains of associations, and memory; as a literary mode it would rely on concepts related to spontaneity, free association, and improvisation. (*Content's Dream* 63)

And what follows in the essay is a discussion of how attempts to represent the

movements of the mind have produced radical literary techniques accurately. Difficult writing becomes privileged in the context of thinking because difficulty signals not just the material ‘stuff’ of poetry, but also the elusiveness of mental processes. Opaque language can thus “make palpable the processes of the mind heart”; the materiality of thought, desire, and language constitute a continuum that the physical resistance of language makes available. Bernstein invokes Olson to describe this process: “Rather than making the language as transparent as possible, [...] the movement is toward opacity/denseness—visibility of language through the making translucent of the medium. To actually map the fullness of thought and its movement” (*Content’s Dream* 70-71).

Bernstein’s version of the relation between poetry and thinking struggles to arrive at profound insight, but is somewhat shackled by the mimetic model that it consistently adopts with respect to thinking and poetry. The need to arrive at the “specificity, the particularity of a composition” and to “bring the world onto the page [and allow] its meanings to be discovered” is related to thought in terms of representation: “The tangibility of perception or thought, of experience—how you can get to that” (*Content’s Dream* 77). But the limitations of this mimetic model, it could be argued, are compensated by the revolutionary inversion that Bernstein achieves in this essay. As he analyzes the work of authors including Hannah Weiner, René Descartes, Louis Zukofsky, and Robert Creeley, he presents thinking as not the *logos* that presides over the poetic act, but as a source of techniques that assist in constructing the linguistic artifact. While at an earlier point in the essay he seemed to dismiss the difference between thinking, writing, and language as merely artificial, he ultimately suggests that thinking can be maintained as an independent category because it is partly a source of poetic artifice (*Content’s Dream*

76): this diminished version of thinking can, however, co-exist with a constructivist poetics that anticipates—rather than merely follows or even accompanies—ideas. But the compromise is achieved at the cost of designating thinking as a subset of language, making it essentially redundant with respect to language and/or poetry.³³

Simon Jarvis is best known as an Adorno scholar and literary critic working primarily in Romanticism, and also writes occasionally about his fellow Cambridge poets. His relatively recent long poem *The Unconditional* is a challenging experiment in pentametric composition; it is also an exploration of the relationship between resistance to meaning and the necessity of plot and argument in long poems. He has written extensively about poetry's relationship to thought, primarily in his book *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song*, but also in a series of essays that deal with Romanticism.³⁴ In *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song*, Jarvis attempts to reconceptualize thought in terms of artifice. So the idea of the 'philosophic song' means for Jarvis

not that philosophy gets fitted into a song – where all the thinking is done by philosophy and only the handiwork by verse – but that the song itself, as song, is philosophic. It might mean that a different kind of thinking happens in verse – that instead of being a sort of thoughtless ornament or reliquary for thinking, verse is itself a kind of cognition, with its own resistances and difficulties. If that were so, Wordsworth's verse would not be 'philosophic Song' chiefly in so far as it exemplified or anticipated some already existing or future philosophical system or authorship. Quite the reverse: it would be philosophic song precisely in so far as driven – by the felt need to give utterance to non-replicable singular experiences in the collectively and historically cognitive form of verse – to obstruct, displace or otherwise change the syntax and the lexicons currently available for the articulation of such experience. Driven to truth, that is, less by top quality ratiocination than by attention to problems of poetic making: provided that such making be understood not as sheer craft, but as itself already a cognitive matter. (3-4)

Here we encounter not only the Heideggerian notion that making itself is thinking, but

³³ Fellow Language poet Barrett Watten remarks without elaborating: "A poem can be a stretch of thinking" ("A Note" 17).

also Adorno's concept of immanent critique which Jarvis clearly finds very attractive, judging from his remarks in *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*.³⁵ The idea that thinking cannot be detached from its own material conditions translates well into the notion of a poetic thinking that is grounded in its formal elements. The intuition here—and it is more explicit in Heidegger—is that cognition is not necessarily the brain-centered Cartesian activity that it is usually considered to be, and that there are modes of thought that cannot be reduced to the activities of the mind, a possibility to which most writing on the relationship between poetry and philosophy remain oblivious or indifferent. Yet Jarvis' dissatisfaction with "sheer craft" (setting aside the question of whether such 'sheer craft' exists empirically or not) indicates that there is a strong affinity between Jarvis and Bernstein in their shared distrust of any aspect of the poetic art that can be considered meaningless, inert, and successfully resistant to all forms of cognitive mapping. There are echoes here of the totalitarianism/totalizing that Bernstein explicitly accepts. Jarvis' partiality to an interpretation of Descartes that implies that thinking in fact includes feelings as well (see chapter 6 of *Philosophic Song*), begs the question of why then this unalienated form of experience is filed under thinking rather than feeling, 'cogito' rather than 'sentio.' The 17th-century hierarchies are thus unfortunately kept intact—despite his best efforts—in Jarvis' ambitious analysis in *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song*. The fundamentally Hegelian format used by both Adorno and Heidegger might also not ultimately be conducive to considering forms of consciousness that are radically different

³⁴ See "Prosody as Cognition" and "Musical Thinking"; also see "The Melodies of Long Poems."

³⁵ In *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, Jarvis describes "immanent critique" in the following manner: "Whereas a 'transcendent' critique, a critique from outside, first establishes its own principles, and then uses them as a yardstick by which to criticize other theories, immanent critique starts out from the principles of the work under discussion itself. It uses the internal contradictions of a body of work to criticize that work in its own terms" (6).

from human, and not just egotistical, ways of being. Such forms of ‘thinking’ must necessarily elude rational descriptions, so that in as much as they exist in poetry, they must exist outside critical reflection. Postmodern thinking has repeatedly recognized this necessary humbling of thought, but any attempt to act upon this insight will involve acknowledging modes of consciousness that do not accord with rationality as it has been understood in Western philosophy. Heidegger’s references to apparently passive, meditative states of mind hover at the edges of a chasm that poetry, of course, gracefully and nonchalantly leaps across. When it returns from its adventures elsewhere, however, it appears to speak in tongues, perhaps even the speech of language itself in all its alien (im)purity.³⁶

When asked about his poem *Lines on the Liver*, Peter Riley makes a remark that must be understood in this context: “The poem’s completion is formal, invoking the world by patterns of displacement and harmony, rather than by conceptual or encyclopaedic coverage. So I don’t think poetry is a sacral purveyor of earth-changing messages from deep and distant unknowables. I think it’s an ornament” (“Peter Riley in Conversation with Keith Tuma”). What might appear to be a trivialization of art as

³⁶ The Heideggerian image of a speaking language represents one of the central motivating forces for Postmodern linguistic experimentation as such, particularly the Postmodern anti-lyric that evacuates the traditional lyric subject from the cognitive and affective center of poetic production. What occupies that vacancy by default is language itself, whose intersubjective presence promises forms of communal knowledge denied to the private individual. Heidegger’s essay “On Language,” in which his statement that “language speaks” makes its first appearance (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 190 and passim), also argues that the speech of language is purest in poetry, particularly in paradoxically ‘masterful’ poems in which the poet’s identity has been effaced in order to make room for the utterance of language itself: the mastery of a poem consists in the poem’s ability to “deny the poet’s person and name” (197). The abdication of the poet in the masterful presence of language renders the poet a medium in the Platonic sense, a shamanic channel that gives public, material presence to impersonal and disembodied forces. The shamanistic conception of the poet’s task and the notion of a speaking language (as opposed to a spoken language) that finds its strongest articulation in poetry weaken the imperative of immediate meaningfulness in favor of illocutionary and/or cryptic utterance. We are also back to “ontological difficulty” as described by Steiner, because in this mode of difficulty, it is “not so much the poet who speaks, but language itself” (Steiner 46).

“ornament” is in fact an assertion of its crafted and self-sustaining alterity; its existence as something that can give no account of its own necessity and somehow justifies itself precisely through this unaccountability. Despite poetry’s social and political inefficacy and its obvious marginality, poets and sympathetic readers persist in believing that poetry does do something, and that this doing is in some way significant. As theoretical approaches to difficulty indicate, this sense of poetry’s value only increases with its difficulty: the more it refuses to communicate, the more urgently it signals its faith in its own unique modes of doing. This sense of uniqueness might only be momentary, as I suggested, and located in the gap between the reader’s apprehension of resistance and the poem’s yielding to effort, but this gap represents poetry’s existence as a separate order of being and knowing.

I will provisionally conclude with an analysis of J.H. Prynne’s approach to this issue. I will focus particularly on “Poetic Thought,” Prynne’s relatively recent lecture delivered in China, and later published in *Textual Practice*. He tentatively defines thought as “something [...] like the active process of thinking, mental energy shaped to some purpose or tendency: I think of it as poetic work” (595). This definition of thought carries, as in Bernstein, strong echoes of Olson’s Fenollosa-derived definition of the poetic act as a transfer of energy. The ‘work’ of poetry is again located in the realm of thinking, and textual opacity is introduced, again as in Bernstein, as an indication of ongoing poetic labor:

The extreme density of the unresolved, which maintains the high energy levels of language in poetic movement, its surreptitious buzz, may resemble unclarity which it partly is; but strong poetic thought frequently originates here, in the tension about and across line-endings, even in functional self-damage or sacrifice as the predicament of an emerging poem determined not to weaken or give way. Thought in this matrix is not unitary (unlike ideas), but is self-disputing and

intrinsically dialectical. (599)

Thought, then, might be conceived as separate from both ideas and philosophy, as indeterminacy itself perhaps, but pushed along vectors determined to evade readymade trajectories of accomplished and assimilated desire. While sustaining distinct family resemblances with the positions of Bernstein and McCaffery, Prynne's interest in thought is not limited, as in Bernstein's case, to the forms of thought that can be imitated through poetic artifice: he is moved by the possibility that poetry itself might be the site of a radical thinking that can only occur within the shifting limits of what might be called poetry. Language, in this context, becomes secondary to the motivation that drives it, and the motivations are both historically determined but also vulnerable to the resistance of local practices.

For Prynne, thinking is not restricted "exclusively or even principally to intellectual procedures or their outcomes," and his definition of 'poetry' is most proximate to a formal description of poetry (596). He therefore takes great care to emphasize that it might be the formal (or in Veronica Forrest-Thomson's terms, the non-semantic levels of poetry) that generate poetic thought:

The fingertip energies of a language are not at all merely or mainly intellectual. Intense abstract visualisation, for example, or sonorous echo-function from auditory cross-talk and the history of embedded sound values in the philological development of a language system, all may carry and perform the pressures of new poetic thought. In addition, the formal constraints of structure are not restricted to tight local intensities of challenge to language use: large and extended structures generate tensions of thought-argument, both performative of conceptual and opportune design and also as oppositional bracing, by demand upon logics of completion and straying against an end. (598)

The essential point here is not significantly distinct from Bernstein's emendations to Veronica Forrest-Thomson; here too form is seen to carry signification quite apart from

meaning.³⁷ Indeed, Bernstein's anxieties about formalism descending into automatism also get replicated in Prynne's argument:

Poetic thought is empowered within and through energies of language under pressure, but is not definitively produced by this intrinsic agency, as if a language-machine could be set up in generational mode and then switched on, with a few corrective interventions from a poet-supervisor. It's all too clear that, in whatever stage of social evolution, a discourse practice defaults in a wink to facile acceptance of the commonplace, to bending compliantly under commercial or political distortions, to accommodate by self-corruption. (598)³⁸

The fallenness of language that preoccupies Prynne also prevents him from relying on language as a form of thinking. Poetic thought is not to be confused with language itself—and Prynne would no doubt argue that Language poets have often been guilty of this confusion—because language defaults to the dominant historical forces that propel it. Language and its pervasive power in social transactions justify the necessity and validity of poetic thought as a possible reconfiguration of our social being, but language is as motivated and untrustworthy as the lyric self, and as complicit in illicit dispensations of power and authority.³⁹ Constant vigilance against being hijacked by the automatic responses built into language by the will of the majority is as important, therefore, as the task of making language—as well as the local and universal structural tendencies within poetry—speak. Poetics ultimately has to be configured in terms of ethics.

But Prynne's argument implies that corruption is not the fate of poetry, and that truly poetic—in the etymological sense of 'making'—thought is indeed possible. Yet can we really encounter a poetic thought? Or is it just beyond the horizon of thought itself, compelling thought to overcome itself in order to attain its undetermined realization? It

³⁷ In a footnote, Prynne criticizes Bernstein's "Thought's Measure" which, according to Prynne, "despite proposing thought as its subject is almost exclusively concerned with thinking as a Cartesian surrogate consequence of autonomous writing practice" (600).

³⁸ According to Joshua Kotin, Prynne's argument here is "more Adornian than Orwellian" (Kotin 203).

seems, as I suggested earlier, that such thought would have to stay beyond rational reflection, but how then can it be known to exist? Prynne himself offers only negative definitions of poetic thought, though his preference for the term ‘thought’ rather than ‘thinking’ indicates a commitment to an impersonal object rather than a subjective, ‘internal’ process: “Thinking coheres into thought” (601 n.4).⁴⁰ His implied justification, via Heidegger, is that thinking cannot define itself and has no call to subject itself to reflection: it must break free from the paradigm of subject-object relations that alone compel such definitions (600 n.2). The form-content divide, which is the necessary starting point for both Bernstein and Jarvis, seems to be entirely inadequate in this field. This is probably why the enormous and encyclopaedic footnotes to “Poetic Thought” include references to Helen Vendler and Charles Bernstein as well as fellow Cambridge poet John Wilkinson, but not to Simon Jarvis, whose book *Wordsworth’s Philosophic Song* came out a year before Prynne gave the lecture, and three years before Prynne finally published the footnoted version in *Textual Practice*. Jarvis’ double move of granting an inert materiality, and therefore an essentiality, to poetic form, and then later endowing it with the same cognitive content that was withdrawn in the first place, leads to a simplification of form: this is particularly strong when he turns to the problem of metrics. Though Prynne does seem to speak mostly of formal choices, poetic form cannot simply

³⁹ See my discussion of complicity in chapter 4.

⁴⁰ Compare Merleau-Ponty on the heteronomy of thought:

Thought is no ‘internal’ thing, and does not exist independently of the world and the words. [...] ‘Pure’ thought reduces itself to a certain void of consciousness, to a momentary desire. The new sense-giving intention knows itself only by donning already available meanings, the outcome of previous acts of expression. The available meanings suddenly link up in accordance with an unknown law, and once and for all a fresh cultural entity has taken on an existence. Thought and expression, then, are simultaneously constituted [...]. (*Phenomenology of Perception* 213)

be poetic thought, though form can be argued to generate poetic thought.⁴¹

So perhaps it is not possible to speak about the unthought that must be given objective reality in poetry. If Prynne's account is correct, however, it is possible to think that the notion of poetic thought might constitute the most persuasive argument for difficulty, especially if a strong causal link can be established between the two terms. Yet such a link is not really available. Though Prynne claims that 'unclarity' signals the presence of poetic thought, his reference to philology indicates that a certain conflicted and oppositional primitive presents itself not just as various kinds of difficulty, but as a pervasive tension between the made and the given (primarily as historical determinateness and otherness), between artifice and resistance. Difficulty alone cannot produce poetic thought, though it seems inevitable that poetic thought must create difficulties due to its estrangement from the cognitive structures through which it is viewed. What the deliberate construction of near-inaccessible linguistic structures might achieve is the creation of a charged field or a primal soup where there is a high probability for the emergence of entirely new entities. But the poem cannot be a thought machine, cranking out poetic thoughts in accordance with a specified formal algorithm or a mechanical law of evolution; it cannot also be entirely dependent upon contingent readings, where the reader's interpretation alone permits the emergence of poetic thought. This is the challenge that both the author and reader must confront: to recognize objective presence and at the same time to deploy one's creativity as if nothing exists, as if individual cognitive acts indeed construct the world. In the irreconcilability of this awareness and in the burden of its responsibility, the meaning of freedom might graze the horizons of our

⁴¹ Several young scholars, including Josh Robinson and Ryan Dobran, seem to be currently at work on the topic of poetic thought, and it is to be hoped that they will be able to produce something more conclusive

experience.

The question that has lurked in the background of this dissertation must now dart into the open, spurred by a now-or-never bravado. The question is the following: what is it that we know when we fail to know? The rhetoric of limits and finitude that such failures frequently generate cannot form the basis of its rightful answer, because the pathos of this rhetoric is based on an egotistical awareness of death, which tinges with melancholy each challenge to the self-centred human subject. The ephemerality of the human subject vouches for the ephemerality of the limit. It might be, rather, that difficulty questions the limit by throwing into relief the entire cognitive act, thereby calling into question our need for both knowledge and ignorance. Poetic difficulty—as opposed to what Prynne calls ‘resistance’—is not just found but also made: it indicates that human beings can make what they do not, and perhaps cannot, know—*knowyng* and *werkynge* might indeed fail to recognize each other in this mode. The encounter with poetic difficulty informs us of the fact that we are safe in ignorance as well as knowledge, and that what we do not know is precisely that which permits us to think of ourselves as free.⁴² As social beings, it is our task to exercise vigilant care, and here knowledge is precious and crucial. But the indeterminacy of the terms of our sociality and our

than the preliminary thoughts presented here.

⁴² When George Oppen declares, “I write in order to know,” he makes a valid point, but knowledge is still privileged here, even if it is understood as radically a-posteriori (qtd. by Peter Nicholls in “Oppen’s Heidegger” 100). Not knowing, which in this model is the condition from which writing begins, might itself be a mode of knowing that is devoid, perhaps, of content. But this is all very speculative, and realizing such possibilities in their full force might involve succeeding finally in bridging the theory-praxis divide (or perhaps recognizing the fictitiousness of this divide). This step has been incredibly difficult within modernity, since modernity is premised upon the founding divisions that allow for freedoms of conduct and thought that are unimaginable under more unified regimes of thinking and existence. Yet it is the poets who seem to have the strongest affinity to this mode of unity that verges, unfortunately, on those forms of knowledge that have been ‘othered’ as ‘mysticism’ and ‘spirituality’; the histories of organized religions that have attempted to capitalize on the insights of such practices have not helped to increase their viability. The lure of a notion like ‘poetic thinking’ consists in the possibility that it could allow Western rationality to

existence becomes available to experience as the cloud of unknowing: whether it disperses into clarity or congeals into torrential obscurity is secondary to the moment of deep, abiding, and intransitive familiarity that arrives with the experience of difficulty.

confront its other; that it could produce a new language and significance for Nagarjuna's "shunyatha," an emptiness that is itself empty, and therefore is also absolute plenitude.

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